The New Criterion

March 2000

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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Jeffrey Meyers will publish, later this year, a life of George Orwell (Norton), *Privileged Moments: Encounters with Writers* (Wisconsin), and *Hemingway: Life into Art* (Cooper Square).

Eric Ormsby wrote about Jorge Luis Borges in the November 1999 issue.

Sarah Ruden's translation of Petronius's *Satyricon* will be published this month by Hackett.

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Richard Tillinghast's *Six Mile Mountain* will be published in May by Story Line Press.

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Notes & Comments: March 2000

Welcome aboard

Has a sense of reality finally insinuated itself into the pages of the *New Statesman*? The venerable English weekly, founded in 1913, has always had a decidedly—often, indeed, militantly—left-of-center cast to it. Imagine our surprise, then, when on Valentine's Day the *New Statesman* published an essay on liberalism that would not have been out of place in the pages of *The New Criterion*. Written by Melanie Phillips, a columnist for the London Sunday *Times*, the essay is partly a heartfelt repudiation of various liberal pieties, partly a wake-up call to her colleagues on the somnolent Left.

Phillips's essay is titled "Why I am Really a Progressive." But one needn't read far to understand that by "progressive" she means the opposite of what left-wing liberals in Britain and the U.S. mean by the term. Phillips begins with a gentle send-up of the utopian presuppositions of contemporary liberalism—presuppositions to which she herself had subscribed:

> Once upon a time, in one of the most enlightened countries on the globe and in the most enlightened era known to mankind, there lived and worked a journalist. Let us call her M. This journalist subscribed to certain unshakeable principles. She believed that members of a civilized society had a set of duties towards each other, that selfishness was wrong, that the strong had a particular responsibility to help the weak, that harm to others could and should be avoided and that the lies with which all power was abused should be exposed. She believed that, by adopting these principles, it was possible to build a better society. She was thus indistinguishable from the left-wing circles in which she moved, which congratulated themselves repeatedly on being the most progressive social grouping in the country, if not the world.

As Phillips recognizes, this cozy realm of self-congratulation generally enjoys a hermetic seal protecting it from acknowledging unpleasant truths. It is her task in this essay to break the seal and let in a series of "disturbing facts" that challenge the virtucratic complacency of left-liberal orthodoxy.

About education, for example, Phillips notes that under the regime of so-called progressivism, "Children were not being taught to read; nor were they being taught history or maths or languages or anything very much. A view had prevailed that children were as well equipped as adults to make sense of experience." The predictable result was "school-leavers who could barely write an application letter and even university undergraduates who needed remedial courses in the basics." The first shock oc-

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curred when Phillips (who is the "M" of the essay) dared to call attention to these unhappy facts. Although parents supported her, "her left-wing friends . . . told her that she had become a reactionary Gradgrind and appallingly right-wing." But how, she wondered, "could it be progressive to support a philosophy that inflicted its most devastating damage upon children at the bottom of the social heap?" How indeed?

Phillips's next shock came when she called attention to the heartbreak and human wreckage caused by casual divorce and single-parent households. Noting the "huge amount of evidence" that "marriage, by and large, was a protection for both children and adults," she argued that "the state should promote it as a social good." Once again, her left-wing friends were appalled by her "reactionary, authoritarian, and right-wing" opinions. But how, she wondered, "could it be progressive to encourage deceit, betrayal of trust, breaking of promises and harm to children?"

Phillips subjected several other left-liberal shibboleths to the same treatment, always with the same results. Liberals of a libertarian stripe have long advocated the legalization of marijuana and even hard drugs like cocaine and heroin. Noting the mounting evidence of permanent harm done by marijuana—let alone other drugs—Phillips argued that "legalization would not minimize harm—it would nationalize it." Fighting words, those, as Phillips discovered when "self-styled liberals" accused her of being "criminally insane," "evil," even a "Nazi."

Irving Kristol once famously quipped that a neo-conservative was a liberal who had been mugged by reality. Phillips is not a neo-conservative; she is a disabused or disillusioned liberal. Her poignant essay provides a case history of the effects of multiple muggings on the sensibility of a thoughtful liberal. The "paradox of liberalism," Phillips writes, "is that, although it is a philosophy of freedom, it depends on moral restraint as the basis of liberty. License, by contrast, is a threat to freedom because it observes no obligation to others." The result is the vertiginous situation we find ourselves in today—a situation in which "liberal" means "license" and virtually any check on individual behavior is regarded as an unconscionable intrusion upon freedom.

> So in our libertarian society, where individual choice is all, "liberal" and "progressive" have come to mean something very different. Liberals took for granted that freedom depended upon self-discipline. Libertarians decided that all such restraint was repressive. The individual had to be free from all attachments to family, culture, nation, institutions and traditions that might fetter freedom of choice. Since every individual was equally entitled to such free choices, the distinctions that were the basis of morality were eroded. To be progressive was thus inevitably redefined as to be free to do harm, with harm itself being reinvented as virtue. . . .
>
> People who criticize this attitude as not only selfish but socially destructive are told, however, that they are illiberal, prejudiced and reactionary. They are also intimidated into silence.

The ultimate effects of this rancid form of liberalism go far beyond the much-publicized bane of "political correctness." Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the phenomenon of political correctness involves a great deal more than university speech codes and consciousness-raising sessions. In the end, political correctness fosters an attitude of ahistorical self-absorption that, although addicted to various liberal slogans, is in reality a surrender of the independence that makes genuine liberty possible. "In such a world," Phillips notes,

> it has become a positive merit to stand for nothing because this means that nothing can stand in the way of change and the march of

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> global capital. All tradition becomes a suitable case for disposal. Yet this is as backward-looking as it is ahistorical. . . .
>
> The idea that all pre-existing traditions or values are, by definition, unprogressive baggage is as philistine as it is risible. Values dismissed as conservative are actually universal: attachment, commitment to individuals and institutions, ties of duty, trust and fidelity, the distinction between constructive and destructive behavior. Without these things, freedom cannot flourish nor society exist. The paradox is that only by conserving such values can progress occur. Small, incremental steps are the best way of bringing about beneficial change. Radicalism or revolution is likely to implode and leave us worse off than before.
>
> In other words, we have to rescue progress from the progressives. We need a liberal, not a libertarian, social order with deeper values than contract, and with other criteria for progress than material advances. Moral restraint is the glue that provides social cohesion. Liberty is not achieved but threatened by the relativistic pursuit of autonomy and rights.

Melanie Phillips's remarkable essay has already elicited a great deal of comment pro and con. Whether it will have the tonic effect it deserves remains to be seen. It is pleasant to contemplate the reaction Tony Blair might have to Phillips's arguments—especially to her rejection of "the Prime Minister's Manichean division between progressives and the forces of conservatism." Phillips's observations are at least as pertinent to the social and political situation in the U.S. as they are to Britain, though there is little to suggest that liberals here have yet awakened from the many muggings to which they have been subjected.

Gray's goulash

Among the several writers whom Melanie Phillips cites with approval is the English political philosopher John Gray. People *will* have their enthusiasms, and we are prepared to forgive Phillips her enthusiasm for John Gray. It is a failing that she shares with many writers for whom we have the highest regard. We would, however, be less than candid if we failed to note that we find the enthusiasm that many conservatives feel for John Gray baffling. Gray did make his reputation as a kind of maverick conservative a decade or so ago. Since then, however—and especially since the rise of Tony Blair—he has been like Henry James's chameleon on a piece of plaid, taking on just about every coloring it is possible to imagine. Gray has elevated inconsistency and equivocation almost to an art. Is there a potentially influential position that John Gray has not at least tacitly endorsed (and subsequently half taken back)? If so, it is a mere oversight, bound to be corrected in his next book—which, as always, will be appearing in a few weeks.

We were spurred to these unpleasant thoughts by Gray's latest performance, "The Light of Other Minds," an essay on John Stuart Mill that appears in the February 11 number of *The Times Literary Supplement*. Mill is a perfect subject for John Gray: vague, moralistic, superior—like calls out to like, as it always will. Not that John Gray unambiguously endorses Mill. That would be a very un-Millian procedure. Although he is said to be "less dated than most of his contemporaries," Mill is nonetheless held to be "Eurocentric" and naïve about the salvational properties of education. According to Gray, "Mill's approach to questions of liberty enables us to think more realistically about the globalization of human rights"; nevertheless Gray says that Mill's faith in the inevitable progress of moral enlightenment and the "species-wide convergence in both values and institutions" is "groundless" and "practically worthless." Gray quotes with evident approval Mill's famous appeal to "utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interest of man as a progressive being," but then chides him (via an appeal to Isaiah Berlin) for relying on any-

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thing so non-utilitarian as the idea of permanent interests. It is one from column A and one from column B; after 1500 words or so, the goulash is complete.

Brilliant though he undoubtedly was, Mill was also an embodiment of moralizing utilitarian fatuousness—a "moral Don Quixote," in James Fitzjames Stephen's memorable phrase. This of course explains a large part of his appeal—not least his appeal to writers like John Gray who aspire to Millian portentousness. Nevertheless, whatever Mill's failings, it has been left to John Gray to make the breathtaking discovery that Mill is really a precursor of both Al Gore and the Australian animal-rights (that is, non-human animal-rights) activist Peter Singer. According to Gray, Mill not only "anticipates late twentieth-century anxiety about the integrity of the natural environment," but also exhibits a laudable understanding that "it is not membership of the human species that grounds moral concern but rather sentience and the capacity for pleasure and pain." Gray praises Mill for environmental sensitivity and for his stand against "speciesism," though not, of course, without leaving himself a way out. Flaccid environmentalism is a certified OK attitude this week, but you never know what changes of sentiment the tide of ideological fashion will bring. So, like Karl Marx, Gray always leaves himself plenty of wiggle room. "It's possible that I shall make an ass of myself," Marx wrote to Engels in 1857. "But in that case one can always get out of it with a little dialectic. I have, of course, so worded my proposition as to be right either way."

John Gray's essay appears as the sixth installment of a series called "Giants Refreshed" in the TLS. Judging from Gray's performance, anyway, it might have been called "Giants in Jest." Gray criticizes what he calls the "vulgar prejudice that environmental concern is necessarily Luddite or anti-modern." But the real issue, as the philosopher Harvey Mansfield puts it in his essay "The Legacy of the Late Sixties (1997)," is the moralizing sentimentality of professional environmentalists and "speciesists." "Environmentalists," Mansfield writes, "worry about future generations—of what? Cockroaches?"

> By itself the environmental outlook seems as one-sided as the technological. . . . The two views are opposite sides of the same coin, both lacking appreciation of any problem in the relationship of man and nature. In our public schools today, . . . environmentalism is instilled with more fervor and authority than religion used to be. The reason is that environmentalism is dressed up as science and it tolerates no contrary faith. It is indeed a form of *pantheism*, the diseased kind of religion demeaning to humanity and endemic to democracy that Tocqueville warned about. Environmentalism is school prayer for liberals.

John Gray offers us "The Light of Other Minds" with his hands firmly folded in an attitude of piety. There is perhaps nothing wrong with that, though how he ever managed to pass himself off as a conservative remains an unfathomed mystery.

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Rudyard Kipling & the god of things as they are

by John Derbyshire

How fortunate we are! After eighty-five years of assorted errors and miseries, the human race has emerged into sunlit uplands. There is no major war, nor any visible prospect of any. Utopian socialism, the principal motive for revolutions throughout the industrial age, has been discredited beyond hope of revival. There is hardly a city anywhere on our planet that does not bustle with enterprise—with healthy, well-dressed people engaged in interesting work. All is calm, all is bright, and even the wretched of the earth have cell phones.

Is it all a fool's paradise? Do we really face decades of peace and prosperity in a world dominated by a single free, civilized, and reflective superpower with primarily mercantile interests? Shall we and our children live out our threescore and ten in the security of bourgeois triumphalism, free to accumulate money, enrich our arts, and advance our sciences? Or is something horrid lurking below the horizon, waiting to mangle our children and poison our culture? Is this 1820, or 1900? I look at my son, four years old, and wonder.

Rudyard Kipling's son, John, was born in 1897 and died eighteen years later at the Battle of Loos. No remains were ever found, though in 1992 the Commonwealth War Graves Commission claimed to have identified a previously unnamed body in one of their cemeteries as John Kipling's. The credibility of that claim, the short life of Rudyard Kipling's only son, and the progress of his parents' grief have recently been made into a book by the British military historians Tonie and Valmai Holt.[1]

On a slight acquaintance with Kipling's reputation, it might seem that the death of his son was ironic. Kipling, as everyone knows, was an imperialist and a militarist. In the years before the war he had campaigned for universal military service in Britain. He sent John to Wellington, a school with strong military connections—it was founded in memory of the duke—and obviously intended him for a military career. A month into the war Kipling published, in *The Times* of London, "For All We Have and Are," one of the finest patriotic poems in our language. The poem closes with those soaring subjunctives that must have sent many a young Englishman off to the recruiting office and the Flanders mud: "What stands if freedom fall?/ Who dies if England live?"

When John Kipling's very poor eyesight (6/36 in both eyes—he could not read the *second* line of an optician's chart unaided) threatened to prevent his enlisting at the outbreak of war, his father pulled strings to secure him a commission in the Irish Guards. John was killed in his first action,

1 The book, *My Boy Jack?* (Leo Cooper, £19.95), can be got on the Internet from English booksellers like Waterstone's. (They are at www.waterstones.com.) What does it matter any more on which side of the Atlantic a book is published?

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on one account being shot in the head while storming a German machine-gun position, on another "crying"—probably a euphemism for "screaming"—in agony with half his face blown away. It is possible that he had lost his glasses somehow and stumbled away from his unit. With casualties running at 80 percent, his comrades were in no condition to go out looking for him. If not killed on the spot, he probably crawled into a shellhole to die, on a battlefield that was then very thoroughly recycled by three further years of incessant shelling.

In fact there was no irony, only tragedy. Kipling himself attended a military school, the United Services College, and had a happy—and very literary—time there. The profession of military officer in Kipling's youth was not sensationally dangerous. Nobody anticipated the appalling military massacres of World War I. Furthermore, Kipling had been warning his countrymen for years about German militarism. It can fairly be claimed that no other public figure in Britain worked harder to avert that war. "For All We Have and Are" reflected the mood of the day: that this was a war against barbarism, against "a crazed and driven foe." This view of things survived the war itself, at any rate officially. I have in my possession the Victory Medal issued to No. 35103 Pte. J. R. Derbyshire of the King's Shropshire Light Infantry, inscribed *The Great War for Civilisation 1914–1919* (dating the war to the peace treaty, not the armistice). That was how people felt. The Germans *had* to be stopped for the sake of civilization. By the time John Kipling came out of training, the odds for subalterns on the Western Front were pretty clear to everyone, and his parents saw him off to France with grim fatalism. As the boy's mother expressed it to her own mother: "There is nothing else to do. The world must be saved from the German . . . one can't let one's friends' and neighbours' sons be killed in order to save us and our son."

Nor was Rudyard Kipling any armchair militarist, nor the twitching sadistic soldier-dad of recent Hollywood coinage—*Dead Poets' Society*, for example. He had seen battle at close quarters in South Africa and spent his early adulthood hanging around officers' messes in India. A loving and dutiful son to his own parents, he was a tender father whose heart had already been broken once by the death of his daughter, Josephine, aged six, in 1899. He loved John dearly and his letters to the boy at school are full of concern and gentle encouragement, family jokes and private language. John Kipling seems, from the Holts' account, to have been an amiable and rather endearing youth, not especially distinguished in any way, definitely not intellectual (at age fourteen he claimed he had read none of his father's books), but witty and good-natured, chiefly interested in playing cricket.

The news that his son was missing was delivered to Kipling by his friend Andrew Bonar Law, then leader of the Conservative Party. Kipling uttered "a curse like the cry of a dying man." He thereafter handled the tragedy with a proper and manly reserve, but echoes of his grief can be found all through his later poetry—most unbearably in "The Children."

> That flesh we had nursed from the first in all cleanness was given
> To corruption unveiled and assailed by the malice of Heaven— . . .
>
> To be senselessly tossed and retossed in stale mutilation
> From crater to crater. For this we shall take expiation.
> *But who shall return to us our children?*

It is plain that Kipling's great powers of imagination had allowed him to see the fate of his beloved boy's corpse all too clearly. From motives of duty, and perhaps therapy, he wrote *The Irish Guards in the Great War* (1923), a formal history of John's regiment. He also served on the Imperial (later Commonwealth) War Graves Commission, where he was especially assiduous in making sure that the sensibilities of Hindus and

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Muslims were respected—something to bring to mind next time you hear Kipling called a "racist."

Though acquainted with Kipling's books since childhood I had until recently never read a scholarly biography of the man, having found Kingsley Amis's brief but pithy and well-illustrated effort—*Rudyard Kipling* in Thames and Hudson's "Literary Lives" series—quite sufficient to satisfy my curiosity. Well, I have now read two scholarly biographies, both published last year in England. One of them, Harry Ricketts's *Rudyard Kipling: A Life*, has been brought out in the U.S. by Carroll & Graf. For the other, Andrew Lycett's *Rudyard Kipling*, no U.S. publication date has yet been announced. Both books, of course, cover much the same ground, and I cannot see why anyone but a reviewer would need to read both; yet it is difficult to recommend one over the other. Both are worthy books, each in its own way.

Andrew Lycett's is the bigger of these two new biographies—660 pages against 440—and has a greater density of detail. In the way of simple facts, it is difficult to believe the author has missed anything at all. He notes, for example, that John Kipling's death was foreseen in the prewar French novel *Dingley*, by Jean and Jérôme Tharaud. *Dingley*, whose origins were in the anti-British feeling engendered, or intensified, in France by the Boer War, featured an imperialist British author who was forced to tone down his bellicosity after his son was killed by the Boers. Lycett gives us many fascinating oddities like this, and altogether has accomplished prodigies of research. I wish he would not keep twitting Kipling for "Orientalism," as if a faddish 1970s essay by a scholar of, if I have not misunderstood recent revelations, no very scrupulous veracity should be the last word on the Anglo-Indian outlook. I am also not sure that Lycett has actually read *The Light That Failed*—his account of it is very garbled. Still, we should all hope to write a 660-page book with so few faults. Lycett is also the biographer of James Bond's creator, Ian Fleming. (Who, by the way, married the great-granddaughter of Mary Wyndham, a close friend of the Kiplings. This is one of those biographies that seem to include everybody you ever heard of. And I have just noticed that ".007" is the title of one of Kipling's short stories.)

It takes more than mere accumulation of detail to succeed at biography, of course, and I think that while Lycett's book is very valuable in its own way, it is Harry Ricketts who has netted the butterfly. Though lighter on detail, marred by some omissions and repetitions, and occasionally wrong-headed (in its discussion of "Recessional," for example—one of the half-dozen finest poems in our language), Ricketts's book is more sympathetic to its subject and has, I think, attained clearer insight into Kipling's personality and writings. He brings out the man's charm—"a Fascinator," Thackeray's daughter called him. His superstitious nature, too: for example, Kipling would not take any payment for "Recessional," nor for any other of what he called his "serious" poems. In his mind, works of that sort were not articles of commerce but propitiatory offerings. Ricketts is also the better read of these two biographers. His selection of other writers' remarks about Kipling is very precise and revealing, in both directions. The extract from Gissing's novel *The Whirlpool* in chapter fifteen—unabridgeable and too long to quote here—is a bullseye, and has put Gissing back on my personal reading list all by itself.

Kipling's published works consist of three-and-a-half novels (*The Naulahka* was a collaboration with Wolcott Balestier, whose sister Kipling married), eleven short story collections, six books of stories regarded by most people—though not necessarily by Kipling—as being for children, a collection of travel pieces, a brief autobiography, the

2 *Rudyard Kipling: A Life*, by Harry Ricketts; Carroll & Graf, 448 pages, $28. *Rudyard Kipling*, by Andrew Lycett; Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 665 pages, £25.

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regimental history mentioned above, and about six hundred poems.

With one exception time has not been very kind to Kipling's prose fiction. This is mostly the result of changes in public taste. The laddish banter that occupies much of *The Light That Failed* now seems quaintly unconvincing. Similarly, nobody cares to read labored reproductions of dialect speech any more, certainly not when they are as various and as festooned with apostrophes as those in *Captains Courageous* and *Soldiers Three*. Some of the short stories, especially the earlier ones, are still fresh, but many more are not. Of Kipling's development as a prose writer, Amis observed: "Kipling developed early and he went off early." Something similar can be said of his reputation.

The exception is of course *Kim*, "the finest story about India ever written" (Nirad Chaudhuri), "one of the greatest novels in the language" (Amis), "a magnificent book" (Henry James). Lycett repeats the story, which I have heard elsewhere, that *Kim* is a cult book among spies; Allen Dulles, it is said, used to keep a copy beside his bed. I hope this is true—I mean, it would be nice to think that our intelligence operatives have such good literary taste. *Kim*, however, is not primarily a spy novel. Kipling did not, in fact, believe it a novel at all. In *Something of Myself*, the autobiographical fragment written at the end of his life, he regretted that he had never written a real novel. *Kim*, he said, was "nakedly picaresque and plotless"; *The Light That Failed* only a *conte*, a tale, not "a built book"; *Captains Courageous* mostly "reporterage." What Kipling meant by "a built book" was a big, structured, plotted work like the classic Victorian "three-decker," like a novel by Dickens or Trollope. In that strict sense he was correct, and no novelist. Few of us, however, would be as hard on Kipling as he was on himself. Personally, I would give an arm to have written a novel as good as *Kim*.

Still, it is hard to imagine that Kipling's prose alone would have kept his reputation afloat through the twentieth century. If he had written no verse we should now think of him in much the same terms as we think of his contemporary Sir James Barrie: as the author of some eminently Disneyable material for children (in Barrie's case *Peter Pan*) and a great deal of other stuff of entirely historical or academic interest. I do not say that this is a fair judgment on Kipling's prose, only that it is the position we should, in all probability, have arrived at. *Kim* is a very fine novel, but I don't know that it is superior to, for example, *Lavengro*—yet who reads Borrow any more? Who—outside the academy, I mean—reads Meredith, a much better novelist than Kipling? The world is full of good books. For a novel to be still in print after a century it is necessary that the novel be good, but it is not sufficient. All but the most celestial literary quality needs assistance from its author's name. The author must have done something else that keeps him in our mind, or at least must have been representative of something, or scandalous or controversial in some way.

The fact of Kipling's name still being known to the general educated public today rests on two of these props. In the first place he was representative of a cast of mind which later generations came to deplore. In the second place he was a great poet. The first is, to a large degree, consequent on the second, for it was through his verse that Kipling's opinions became widely and generally known. Midcentury intellectuals seeking to disparage Kipling did not quote *Kim* or *The Jungle Book*; they whacked you over the head with "the white man's burden" and "lesser breeds without the law." Kipling's fame, and his infamy too, rests above all on his verse.

This is a tribute, and a back-handed one, to the power of that verse. Kipling wrote exquisitely beautiful lines—sometimes whole stanzas of them together. He wrote some awful lines too, of course—"When 'Omer smote 'is bloomin' lyre" perhaps the worst. But most of Kipling's poetry is good, and a remarkable proportion of it is very good

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indeed. You can open *The Definitive Edition of Rudyard Kipling's Verse* at random and be pretty sure to find something worth reading. I have just tried this experiment, in fact, and found two poems I had never read before. Verso: "The Craftsman," about Shakespeare, seven quatrains in unrhymed dactylic tetrameter except that the fourth line of each is in dimeter. The bard is imagined talking in an inn with Ben Jonson, describing some of the real-life scenes that inspired his work. Recto: "Samuel Pepys," an appreciation of the seventeenth-century diarist in seven quatrains of iambic tetrameter rhymed *abab*. This is a better piece than "The Craftsman," marred somewhat by an oddly Augustan diction and too many classical references, but triumphing over these shortcomings in a beautifully executed final stanza.

> And Clio kissed;
>
> Bidding him write each sordid love,
> Shame, panic, strategem and lie
> In full, that sinners undiscov-
> ered, like ourselves, might say:—"'Tis I!"

Now, I am not saying that these are great poems. They are decently good poems, that is all: inspired by obvious feeling for their subjects, well thought out, crafted with discipline and grace and a touch of audacity (that tmesis of "undiscovered"). I do not expect to see either of them in future editions of *The Oxford Book of English Verse* and shall probably not return to either of them myself. Still I say they are good poems, and in an age that has produced so many bad poems, that is not nothing. I speak from some feeling here, having recently been involved in the production of a CD anthology of American poetry. By way of what Wall Street folk call "due diligence" in carrying out my editorial responsibilities, I read all 722 pages of *The Voice That is Great Within Us*, a popular collection of twentieth-century American verse, widely used in high schools. I can say with confidence that "The Craftsman" and "Samuel Pepys" are better poems than 95 percent of what is gathered therein. (And note in passing that the latter poem was written when Kipling was sixty-eight years old.)

These two poems point up another fact about Kipling's poetry: not much of it—and even less of the best of it—is concerned with chaps in pith helmets keeping the wogs at bay on the Northwest Frontier. In June 1997, a British radio station, Classic FM, polled its listeners for their favorite poems. Following an overwhelming response, they collected the results and published the top one-hundred poems as a boxed set of cassette tapes (*Classic FM One Hundred Favourite Poems*, also available from Waterstone's). Three of Kipling's poems are included: "The Glory of the Garden" at number sixty-one, "The Way Through the Woods" at number twenty-nine, and "If—" at number two. It is interesting that none of these poems contains any trace of the imperialist bombast, militarism, or condescension towards other races that a person who is acquainted with Kipling only by reputation might expect. The first is in praise of gardening, the principal religion of the English. Far from condescending to anyone, it implies that the hired gardener, of whom there were many thousands in Kipling's time, is morally superior to the elegant folk who enjoy the fruits of his labor:

> Our England is a garden, and such gardens
> are not made
> By singing:—"Oh, how beautiful!" and
> sitting in the shade,
> While better men than we go out and start
> their working lives
> At grubbing weeds from gravel-paths with
> broken dinner-knives.

The second is a charming piece of whimsy from the side of Kipling—more evident in his short stories—that flirted with the supernatural. The third is one of the three finest hortatory poems in our language, the others being Longfellow's "Psalm of

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Life" and Clough's "Say Not the Struggle Nought Availeth." That there is a widespread public appetite for hortatory verse can be seen from the undiminished popularity of "If—," which still adorns the walls of offices and schoolrooms all over the English-speaking world. It is an appetite that no good poet since Kipling has been able to supply—nor even, for all I can see, deigned to notice.

I do not mean to imply that there is anything wrong with the poems of empire and army life. Some of them stand among Kipling's best. They are hardly ever bombastic and practically never militaristic. Kipling's entire view of the military experience, as lived by common soldiers, can be seen laid out for inspection (so to speak) in "The Young British Soldier." Here it is, as it undoubtedly was: cholera and foul liquor, sunstroke and the faithless wife, terror under fire and the horrible, utterly inglorious end,

> When you're wounded and left on
> Afghanistan's plains,
> And the women come out to cut up what
> remains.

Hardly a recruiting poster. Kipling knew that a British soldier was actually more likely to die of disease than in combat—a fact that was true up until the First World War. (In the Boer War the ratio was five to one.) Here comes the old flotilla on the road to Mandalay, guns primed to teach King Thebaw a lesson, no doubt. But look a little closer: "With our sick beneath the awnings when we went to Mandalay!" There you have the Kipling touch, the stroke of raw realism that stops the eye and turns the mood—like those broken dinner-knives. Kipling's god was, in his own words, the "God of Things As They Are." To say, in the commonplace phrase, that he had a journalist's eye for detail is preposterously inadequate. It is hard to think of any writer, in any genre, that could put forward so precisely the telling detail, at so precisely the telling moment, as deftly as Kipling could. To return for a moment to the prose, look at the depth of detail in *Kim*. The novel is a rain forest of detail, with a thousand species of detail jostling together—the fold of a robe, the girth of a leg, the cut of a Marathi's turban, the handling of food and exchanging of courtesies both false and true, the taste of the air in the hills, and the color of twilight on the Grand Trunk Road. That is what makes the novel so unforgettable.

Not that Kipling ever let the God of Things As They Are stand between him and a beautiful line of verse. As everybody has noticed, there is no part of Burma from which the "dawn comes up like thunder out of China 'crost the bay"—certainly not Moulmein, which is on the *east* coast of the Martaban Gulf. Similarly with that fine thundering couplet in "Route Marchin'":

> We're marchin' on relief over Inja's coral
> strand,
> Eight 'undred fightin' Englishmen, the
> Colonel, and the Band.

Which loses nothing from our having been told in a previous stanza that the actual route being marched is from Umballa to Cawnpore—a road which is nowhere less than five hundred miles from the nearest coral strand!

"Route Marchin'" and many other of Kipling's poems were set to music and became staples of vaudeville and the lowbrow concert-hall. I was brought up with these songs: my father was a fan of the Australian bass-baritone Peter Dawson (1881–1961), who recorded dozens of them. Leonard Warren covered some of the same ground in America, and many Americans, mostly of a certain age, can sing a few lines of "Boots" or "Danny Deever," but Warren's renderings are, to my taste, over-dramatized and over-enunciated. Warren was too much the opera pro, ill at ease in a lowbrow repertoire. Dawson, though originally trained in opera and lieder, said he would rather sing Kipling's words than any others. His judgment

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was correct: his large, muscular voice actually strengthens the verses, so that it is hard to believe they were not originally intended as song lyrics. As perhaps they were: we have the word of one of Kipling's editors in his journalist days that he tried out a poem by humming it "in notes that suggested a solo on a bugle." Kipling seems not otherwise to have been very musical. His taste in performed music stopped at, or not very far beyond, Gilbert and Sullivan. Still, it is remarkable that a first-class writer who was also quite a gifted artist—he illustrated *Just So Stories* himself and his thorough knowledge of art technique can be seen in *The Light That Failed*—should have had so instinctual a feel for music at any level. One thinks of Doctor Johnson's definition of genius: "a mind of large general powers, accidentally determined to some particular direction." If Kipling had not started work young—he was sixteen—as a journalist, one wonders what other thing he might have become.

There is no doubt that Kipling looked down on the colored races, but "racism" is not the proper word for his attitude. He did not think them biologically inferior, only incapable of self-government at the time he found them. "You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din": and the negro cook in *Captains Courageous* is treated with no more or less condescension than the other crew members, except that he has powers of clairvoyance. Ricketts gives us Kipling's very interesting definition of "white man," delivered in 1897: "the race speaking the English tongue, with a high birth rate and a low murder rate, living quietly under Laws which are neither bought nor sold." Those "lesser breeds without the law" were Germans; as Andrew Lycett makes clear, Kipling had just begun to obsess about the German threat at the time he wrote "Recessional." Even Edward Said in "The Pleasures of Imperialism," his essay on *Kim*, has trouble sticking a charge of racism on Kipling. (At least, I *think* he does: I confess to finding Professor Said next to unreadable.) The general tenor of Kipling's attitude to the colonialized peoples is the blend of paternalism and respect found in "Fuzzy-Wuzzy":

> So 'ere's *to* you, Fuzzy-Wuzzy,
> at your 'ome in the Soudan;
> You're a pore benighted 'eathen
> but a first-class fightin' man.

I once found myself sharing a student dormitory in Peking with a Sudanese—a great strapping fellow full of Islamic fire and anti-Western contempt, who would indeed have been fearsome with his hair grown out and a spear in his hand. I sang "Fuzzy-Wuzzy" for him, or at least the two stanzas Dawson recorded, and wrote it out, and explained the references. Samy was delighted and pronounced Kipling "a very good poet" while General Gordon rolled and wept in his grave.

Kipling was even capable of expressing what in current American cant is called "a commitment to diversity." His poem "We and They," for example, would sit very comfortably on the wall of any present-day American schoolroom, between the pictures of Frederick Douglass and Sacajawea:

> All good people agree,
> And all good people say,
> All nice people, like Us, are We
> And everyone else is They:
> But if you cross over the sea,
> Instead of over the way,
> You may end by (think of it!) looking on We
> As only a sort of They!

And yet we have Kipling, a natural philosemite who lent a sympathetic ear to the British Israel cult (they believed the British were one of the lost tribes) and who detested Hitlerism with all his heart, telling Rider Haggard that "we owe all our Russian troubles, and many others, to the machinations of the Jews." And we have Kipling the Francophile, who raised a family bilingual in English and French, who admired French literature and took an

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annual vacation in France, saying, after the Paris peace conference: "I dare say the French are pigs from certain points of view."

I do not see why we should make much of this. It is ordinary everyday hypocrisy, of the kind that no harmonious society can altogether manage without. Kipling only ever vented such feelings in private, which indicates that he felt ashamed of them, as of foul language—in respect of which latter, Kipling had found hypocrisy indispensable in his work. What would the *Barrack-Room Ballads* have been if he had actually recorded the repetitive obscenity of soldiers' speech? Unpublished, that's what. Kipling had to invent a soldier-dialect of his own. George Orwell observed correctly that the soldier poems ("Follow Me 'Ome") read much better if you replace those damned apostrophes with the initial *h*s and terminal *g*s Kipling dropped ("Follow Me Home"—perhaps the best elegy for a friend in English, unless you think "Lycidas" a good poem). One can do this without compunction in the knowledge that the result is very little further from nineteenth-century soldiers' actual speech patterns than the originals. No doubt Kipling suppressed much else, too. Some years ago a reporter for *The Wall Street Journal* tracked down one of the last surviving Indian mess servants. Here is the report, as reproduced in Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy's book *The Public School Phenomenon*.

> Drinks are served by Geba Kahn, first mess sergeant, who has been serving in the mess since 1910. At eighty-seven he must be one of the oldest soldiers anywhere.
>
> The visitor asks Geba Kahn what the British officers used to do here in the evenings half a century ago.
>
> "Play bridge, sir," says Geba Kahn.
>
> "Oh, tell him what else," one of the Pakistani officers says.
>
> "Sodomy, sir," Geba Kahn replies.

If it was hypocrisy on Kipling's part to spare us that in order to give us *Plain Tales From the Hills*, that is a hypocrisy I can live with very happily. And if he sometimes used the "n" word in private to refer to those whose sensibilities he so watchfully guarded in his work at the War Graves Commission, I see no reason to think any the less of him for it.

The man's larger political views need to be seen in the context of the great social disturbances that roiled his country in the years before the First World War—those disturbances described so readably by George Dangerfield in *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (1935). Female suffrage, Irish republican agitation, the rising power of labor unions, the first stirrings of the welfare state: none of it made sense to Kipling and he expressed his feelings in public speeches, and in poems like "The City of Brass":

> They said: "Who has hate in his soul? Who has envied his neighbour?
> Let him arise and control both that man and his labour."
> They said: "Who is eaten by sloth? Whose unthrift has destroyed him?
> He shall levy a tribute from all because none have employed him."

Evelyn Waugh said it exactly:

> [Kipling] was a conservative in the sense that he believed civilization to be something laboriously achieved which was only precariously defended. He wanted to see the defences fully manned and he hated the liberals because he thought them gullible and feeble, believing in the easy perfectibility of man and ready to abandon the work of centuries for sentimental qualms.

While a modern conservative can certainly follow Kipling's thinking here (I have just noticed the last line of that stanza, with a resonance of its own in the age of O. J. Simpson: "The slayer, too, boasted his slain, and the judges released him"), it bears saying that there was one large area of human experience that was unknown to Kipling, and that has almost slipped from

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our own memories: the life of the industrial working class. For example: in 1908, when "The City of Brass" was written, several hundred thousand Englishmen—including both my grandfathers—worked as coal miners, doing hard labor in conditions of filth and danger for starvation wages. It is very hard to blame them for being unhappy with their lot. They strove to improve it, and *did* improve it, by dint of the kind of agitations that made Kipling froth and foam. They thereby made as large a contribution to the world of ease and security we now enjoy as did Kipling's box-wallahs.

It is curious that Kipling, for all his interest in machinery and his respect for "The Day's Work," seems hardly to have known of the existence of these working people. His books are full of his fascination with how things are made and done. "Troop says *the* most interesting thing in the world is to find out how the next man gets his vittles," says the preppie in *Captains Courageous*. This might almost be Kipling's professional motto. Yet on closer inspection Kipling's interest in work processes was limited to those that had some connection with his core enthusiasms: India, the army, the sea.

Like all true Tories, Rudyard Kipling was a very democratic man in person. He had, as the English say, "no side." He would talk to—and, much more important for a writer, *listen* to—anybody at all. To the end of his life he refused all nonacademic honors, though he was offered a knighthood and could have got a peerage with a word in the right ear. This is the more surprising when one recalls that British India in the 1880s, when Kipling was working his apprenticeship, was a place where snobbery, that most loathsome of English vices, flourished unchecked. As the son of a nobody—his father was an art instructor—practicing a barely respectable trade himself ("Who is it, Jenkins?" "Two reporters, milord, and a gentleman from *The Times*"), Kipling must have been on the receiving end of a great many slights. A lesser man would have sought compensation in his days of fame and wealth, but Kipling never troubled himself in the least about rank or status and never sought out great men. If he ended up with many such among his acquaintance, it was from *their* seeking out *him*.

Literary snobbery, when he first encountered it in the London of the 1890s "Decadence," seems to have disgusted him. I doubt he was much bothered that at the end of his life he was as unfashionable as it is possible for a writer to be. You would have been thrown out of any self-respecting literary gathering in 1936 if you had quoted "Mandalay" (which Orwell, according to Malcolm Muggeridge, thought "the most beautiful poem in the English language"). Among the eight nominal pallbearers present to inter Kipling's ashes in Poets' Corner were the prime minister, a field marshal, and an admiral of the fleet. The nearest thing to a literary person was Howell Gwynne, the editor of the *Morning Post*.

Now we are wiser. After our time of nightmares, when the mass killing of unarmed civilians has routinely been used as an instrument of peacetime social policy over half the world, Kipling's reactionary blatherings seem merely crusty and feudal. Even the Raj doesn't look like such an unspeakably bad idea after the horrors of Partition and the—what is it, three?—Indo-Pakistani wars, the next one apparently to be fought with nuclear weapons. The hottest show on Broadway is *The Lion King*—whole sections of whose plot are lifted from *The Jungle Book*. On my table is a copy of *Newsweek* containing an interview with one of the founders of Médecins Sans Frontières headlined: "A Man Who Fights the Savage Wars of Peace." Best of all, after a century of murderous political fantasies, great masses of the human race have returned in allegiance to the God of Things As They Are. For how long, this time around, that deity will be able to hold off the God of Wishful Thinking remains to be seen.

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The passion of Walker Evans

by Daniel Mark Epstein

America's infatuation with photography has thrived upon its easy accessibility. By 1903, the year Walker Evans was born, George Eastman had made the roll-film camera so cheap that soon no family reunion or Sunday picnic need ever lack a "photo artist" to immortalize it. Amateur camera societies and photo exhibitions sprang up in cities and towns from coast to coast. And while professionals like Alfred Stieglitz fought for "the serious recognition of photography as an additional medium of pictorial expression," arguing that the photographer's gift, like the painter's, was privileged vision, the larger public remained quite content with the belief that one person's photo was pretty much as good as another's.

It would be Walker Evans's destiny, in a career that spanned five decades, to settle the question of "privileged vision" once and for all. That he did so while choosing as his greatest subjects the poor, the disenfranchised and their "vernacular" surroundings, presents one of the richest paradoxes in our cultural history.

By the time Walker Evans, Jr. sent his son, Walker Evans III, to Europe to study French literature in 1926, no American abroad felt properly accoutred without a camera. And the dapper young Evans was never a man to be less than perfectly turned out. With his pocket camera he took a few photos, on a lark. He shot a picture of a grim-lipped soldier in the classical Palazzo Royale, Naples. The man is amusingly juxtaposed with a fanciful four-lanterned street lamp that slightly upstages him. He took several "arty" self-portraits of his beak-nosed, patrician profile in silhouette at Juan-les-Pins. In the Luxembourg Gardens on Christmas Day, he handed the camera to his mother. That lady snapped his picture full-length in a Chesterfield and bowler, hands in his coat pockets, his narrow-eyed, long triangular face, in the smoothness of youth, looking a little like Stan Laurel, minus the sense of humor. This is a young man who takes himself very seriously.

He had gone to Paris to stroll the streets that Baudelaire, Flaubert, and Gautier had known, and to study the pellucid language of that eternally youthful literature. From Baudelaire he learned the force of treating vernacular subjects with classical aesthetic ideals—vernacular, a word and concept he would cherish. From Flaubert he took to heart the value of the *mot juste* and the rule to use no word, no gesture not absolutely germane to the story. No doubt he also learned the pleasures of hard edges, spareness, and clarity from Gautier's book of poems *Emaux et Camées*. Evans studied diligently, wrote essays, stories, and poems, and he took photographs "with his left hand." He wrote: "My self analysis is becoming self-laceration; my failures call for such ardent criticism (and get it) that I am in a fair way . . . to what?" His writing was frustrating, the product of a soul somewhat

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too dry, an intelligence and innate irony that stifled the animation of fictional characters and situations. But the photographs he was easily taking were fluid and penetrating.

Upon returning to New York in May of 1927, Evans took a vest-pocket-sized snapshot of the parade honoring Lindbergh's transatlantic flight. Technically awkward, blurry, it is nevertheless pure Evans, in the "documentary style." He had chosen to frame not the famous pilot in his motorcade but rather the rearview of soldiers at ease in parade dress, and behind them the street littered with crumpled handbills and confetti.

"Fine photography is literature, and it should be," he would tell students, years later. He had the storytelling instinct, the eye for detail and drama that makes lasting literature, but he lacked a certain fluency, or generosity with words—it is hard to know which. Evans threw himself into this new medium, applying to it the aesthetic criteria he had learned from writers.

> Oh yes, I was a passionate photographer, and for a while somewhat guiltily, because I thought that this is a substitute for something else—well for writing, for one thing. . . . But I got very engaged and I was compulsive about it too. . . . It was a real drive. Particularly when the lighting was right. You couldn't keep me in.

The new biography *Walker Evans*,[1] the life story vividly told by the late James Mellow, is an invaluable guide to the 175 photographs now on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Organized by Jeff L. Rosenheim, this exhibition is the "first comprehensive retrospective" ever devoted to the famous photographer.[2]

Pictures speak for themselves, as Evans himself was fond of saying. But the work of a major figure like Evans is a species of theater in which the photographer, as supporting actor, alters the chemistry of his entire cast. So our understanding of the artist's life and character gives a special resonance to the documentary photograph. It has become an "in" joke if not yet an idée reçu among Rembrandt scholars that his portraits all look more or less like the Dutch master himself. While a photographer does not literally project his expressions onto the film they have a graphic effect: the humorist evokes delight in his subjects and the ironist irony or disdain. Anyone who has worked closely with a photojournalist has seen how her personality alters or sustains a scene. Magnify this talent by ten and you get a genius like Evans or Margaret Bourke-White, whose impact upon the visual arts can never be entirely appreciated apart from the personality, the life that informs the eye. *Who took the picture*? We wonder. The photographer is, in a peculiar sense, part of the picture.

Walker Evans was born in upper-middle-class comfort in St. Louis, Missouri in 1903. The family soon moved to the wealthy Chicago suburb of Kenilworth, then finally to Toledo, Ohio. He was close to his sister Jane, whose candid snapshots of her little brother show a pixie-faced Lord Fauntleroy, neatly groomed, prim—obviously a boy who would not roll in the dirt. Walker Evans III was the son of an advertising executive who came from a long line of venerable New England families. His mother, Jesse Beach Crane, was from similar stock. Though advertising became an im-

1 *Walker Evans*, by James Mellow; Basic Books, 600 pages, $40.

2 "Walker Evans" opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on February 1, 2000, and remains on view until May 14. The exhibition will then be seen at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (June 2–September 12, 2000) and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (December 17, 2000–March 11, 2001). A catalog of the exhibition, by Maria Morris Hambourg, Jeff L. Rosenheim, Douglas Eklund, and Mia Fineman, has been published by the Metropolitan Museum in association with the Princeton University Press (318 pages, $65, $40 paper).

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portant motif in his works, Evans harbored a lifelong contempt for his father's bourgeois livelihood. He referred to Walker Jr. as a "professional hack writer." In this disdain for commerce as in several other prejudices, including his anti-semitism, Evans typified his class and generation.

He went to Mercersburg Academy in Pennsylvania, then graduated from Phillips Academy in Andover in 1922, where he showed uncommon talent for writing. T. S. Eliot and James Joyce fueled his adolescent rebellion against his father's values; Baudelaire and Rimbaud inspired him to follow his dreams into the world of art and literature. After a brief enrollment at Williams College in 1923, Evans moved to New York City. He worked in the Map Room of the New York Public Library, read voraciously and met Hanns Skolle, a strikingly good-looking German painter. Skolle became a soulmate, confidant, and critic of Evans's writings. When Evans went to Paris in 1926, the painter corresponded with the frustrated writer and budding photographer until his return to Manhattan in 1927. During those early years, Skolle's ardent faith in his friend's talent anchored Evans's growing belief in himself.

As the exhibit at the Metropolitan demonstrates, Evans's aesthetic and his direction were already well formed by 1928. His tastes ran toward the "functionalism" of the Bauhaus—toward Feininger and Mies van der Rohe. It is only fair to say that Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen had made strides in rescuing photography from the symbolists and the mannered Pictorial photographers who dominated the field at the turn of the century; with Paul Haviland, the so-called "Photo-Secessionists" had focused the lens on the American city. Now it was up to Evans to outflank them all, denouncing Stieglitz as "too arty." He preferred the direct "documentary-style" of Paul Strand, whose famous photograph of the blind beggar had been an epiphany to the neophyte photographer. Like Strand and Eugène Atget, Evans would take his subjects as they appeared, from the "vernacular." He loved this imperial word, which has come to mean native or regional, but is rooted in the Latin *verna*: a slave born in his master's house.

So, carrying the ironies of modernist literature in one pocket, and the rules and techniques of the Bauhaus in the other, Evans shot angle views of Manhattan buildings and street scenes with austere grace and an exuberant spontaneity that would have been impossible a decade earlier. His was the first generation to grow up on photojournalism. *Wall Street Windows* (1928–30) shows a grid of black domino-shaped windows in a stark white wall, viewed through the zig-zag of a fire escape. It's an abstract composition worthy of Juan Gris. In 1929 he shot the Brooklyn Bridge from beneath, a black wedge plunging into the froth of clouds. In *42nd Street* (1929), a black woman in a cloche hat, wrapped in a fur stole, trapped by automobiles and the photographer, is about to be surprised by a policeman (cropped headless) descending the stairs from the elevated train. Evans developed a series of sign collages: *Broadway* (1930) with marquee lights white on black (it appeared on the cover of the trade journal *Advertising and Selling*) and *Outdoor Advertisements* (1929). By 1930 such work was fetching him $125 per photo, and the Depression was well under way.

Once the young gentleman from St. Louis began taking photographs in earnest, his rise to preeminence among his colleagues was meteoric. Forget the myth of the struggling artist. Walker Evans would not be poor for long. Strikingly talented, and with a dark personal charisma, he was destined for early success. He was taken up by Lincoln Kirstein, the brilliant, wealthy young editor of *Hound & Horn*, who was virtually smitten with him, and who published his early work in that prestigious showcase of modernism. Evans met Hart Crane in 1929, charmed the poet, and in 1930 photo-illustrated the early editions of Crane's poem *The Bridge*. The next year Evans exhibited with Margaret Bourke-

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White and Ralph Steiner at the John Becker Gallery in New York. Kirstein invited the photographer to tour New England, at the editor's expense, recording Victorian architecture for a possible book. Kirstein would recommend the fruit of that labor to Alfred Barr, director of the new Museum of Modern Art. Barr was so enchanted by the photographs he called for a show at once. So in 1933 Walker Evans, thirty years of age, was given the first one-man photographic exhibition by a major American museum.

Somewhat later Lincoln Kirstein, more convinced than ever of Evans's genius, confessed that if he had not known the artist personally, he would never have gone to such extremes to promote the work. An interesting comment on Evans's charisma, suggesting as it does the extent to which he may have influenced the expressions of his subjects.

The stages of Walker Evans's career are as clearly demarcated and logical as the acts in a French play, and the exhibition upstairs at the Metropolitan, in four medium-sized galleries, does a fine job of representing his progress. The pictures are well lighted and spaced, in roughly chronological order, without excessive commentary, and the selection is excellent. If there are few surprises for the Evans enthusiast, there are few disappointments. Most of the great pictures are included, in vintage prints. The first room contains the early European and Manhattan photos I have described above, as well as several additional signage studies. There is *Torn Movie Poster* (1931) in which the painted actress's face is horribly disfigured by a vertical tear in the paper; and the *Truck and Sign* (1930), an image of laborers loading an enormous electric sign, DAMAGED, onto a truck—an enduring emblem of the Depression.

Evans went on the road to New England in 1931 for the Victorian architecture, to Cuba in 1933 to illustrate the social scene for Carleton Beals's *The Crime of Cuba*, and in 1934 through the middle-Atlantic states and the South. In 1935 he worked for the U.S. Resettlement Administration, recording social conditions during the Depression. It is during this second period, 1931–35, that Evans perfected his technique, developed a full "palette," if you will, of whites, grays and blacks, and the second room of the exhibition is devoted to it. One moves into this salon as into a shaft of light. Here are many of Evans's most appealing pictures, beginning with the architectural wonder of *Maine Pump* (1933), with its counterpoint of Gothic lines. The slender black pump and its wooden sluice are sheltered by a cupolaed wooden awning with a gingerbread, scalloped frieze; the grey cupola peaks in a spindle; the awning is bracketed to a pointed archway over one of two adjacent doors to the house. The door left of the pump is open and pitch dark, while the pale door under the awning stands closed. No one but Walker Evans could discover such rhythms of light and shadow, and only on this particular spring morning, at a certain hour he had awaited, standing by the 8x10 camera on its tripod. The wonder is in the details, the fine range of tones from black to pure white as light bathes the awning, and the gradation from darkness to light in the row of little openwork quatrefoils in the frieze.

To say that Walker Evans was fastidious is a kinder way of saying he was obsessive. He was certainly a perfectionist, and he found the perfect instrument in the 8x10, "large-view" camera. Evans and the 8x10 were made for each other. It is no exaggeration to say that in the *Maine Pump* image every splinter and blade of grass shines in its proper place. The glory of this cumbersome, hooded tripod camera is that it posits an ideal reality—as near as one can imagine—by delivering far more visual information, with greater resolution, than the naked eye can see. So in the hands of a sublime artist, one who has learned from Baudelaire to look for truth and beauty in the "vernacular," the 8x10 negative becomes a ground where the real can meet the ideal.

For the justly celebrated *Main Street, Saratoga, New York* (1931), Evans set up his tripod in the upper window of a high

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building just after a rainstorm had glazed the streets, cars, and buildings, and the light was returning. Fifty black automobiles are angled against the curb under the glistening, leafless young elms; they recede toward the vanishing point where they might meet the facades of town buildings, their distant white columns almost silver next to the coal-black of the tree trunks. Everywhere is careful measurement and rhythm: fifty cars, fifty distinct tree limbs; nine tree trunks, nine curved steps on the staircase at the photo's edge.

In Havana, Evans was shocked by the suffering he saw under the Machado regime, and by the ethnic diversity of the culture, the blacks, the Spanish, the Chinese. The most famous image of this visit is the *Citizen in Downtown Havana* (1933), in which a white-suited black man, long, lean and elegant, stands at a news kiosk beneath an arcade. From under the brim of his straw hat, the citizen cautiously eyes the photographer. The shelf of journals is full of visual jokes: a picture of Rodin's "Thinker" appears to leap from the citizen's head like Athena from the skull of Zeus. A sloe-eyed starlet on a magazine cover hovers eye-level with the black man, mimicking his look of suspicion. Above all we are struck by the figure's elegance, against the classical architecture, the subtle sinuosity of his length; it reminds us that Walker Evans was an enviable ballroom dancer, comfortable in his slender body and graceful in his movements.

Also in Havana the photographer took group portraits of haggard, soot-blackened coal dock workers, and a drunk vagrant asleep on a bench in the Prado. He created the haunting *Courtyard, Havana*, focusing his camera on a life-sized mannequin of a black boy dressed in rags, a hand and an arm missing. Evans found the doll standing next to a water fountain, his head wedged in the angle of water pipes whose shape echoes the white erosion stains from the fountain spigot. With its pleading eyes and frown, that doll's face could not be much more pathetic were it real.

After Cuba, Evans continued his documentation of architecture and roadside scenes first for *Fortune Magazine* and then for the Farm Security Administration. In Pennsylvania and West Virginia in 1935 he began to choose more dramatic subjects: Joe's Auto Graveyard, like a Brady photograph of a corpse-heaped battlefield; the enormous white stone cross overlooking a cemetery and the dying town of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

In the rich anthology of this second period of Evans's development, one image stands out as a masterpiece: *West Virginia Living Room* (1935). The face of the boy in the chair against a knotted pine wall looks so much like little Walker Evans that the resemblance is startling. Wearing a threadbare shirt and short pants, his soiled bare feet crossed at the ankles, the boy manages a smile at once wistful and heartbreaking. The picture is evenly divided into three parts: the poor boy in the chair, left; a large corner cupboard, center; and a low mission-style pier table on the right. The walls behind the furniture are lined with cardboard and advertising placards for insulation.

And here is where Evans works his magic as a storyteller. Behind the pier table smiles a cardboard cutout of jolly Santa Claus; to Santa's left, flush with the cupboard edge, stands a life-sized picture of a pretty woman pointing with her right forefinger toward the palm of her left hand, which once held something for sale but is now sadly empty. And high in the center, popping out from behind the cupboard like a jack-in-the-box, is a life-sized cutout of a lovely, smiling mother bouncing a baby on her lap. Mother and child are amazingly vivid, blooming with health, far more real-looking than the overexposed face of the real boy in the foreground.

Here is no cleverness, cuteness or aesthetic fiddling; here is no melodramatic suspense attending a foreshadowed event. This is an American tragedy, in a cold house where Santa Claus will never come—this child's lonely life which will never be more

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than a ghost of what the advertisements have promised.

Walker Evans was ready for the third act, the climax of his charmed career.

Perhaps the thing that I found most astonishing in the show at the Metropolitan will not surprise anyone else. Walker Evans's most famous images, the sixty photographs of the tenant farmers he took to accompany James Agee's text *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), are, beyond any reasonable doubt, his greatest works. I was prepared to think differently, because like others of my generation, I can hardly remember a time when I did not know these images. I thought that they might have become clichés by now. But the installation of twenty of these pictures, filling the third salon of the exhibit, makes the truth utterly clear. One has the sensation of passing from the safe, orderly rituals of art into the terrifying radiance of the real world. Whatever was left of Evans's defenses by 1936 has been stripped away by the exigencies of the Great Depression. Here we find unaccommodated man; we stand face to face with these dirt farmers, soul to soul, and the connection seems unmediated.

We are met by the raw-boned, half-starved face of Allie Mae Burroughs, the *Alabama Tenant Farmer's Wife*, who became the poster girl of the Great Depression, with her knife-like, tight-lipped mouth, and narrow eyes to match. Her skin is prematurely lined around the mouth and under the eyes, and fasces of vertical wrinkles divide the straight line of the eyebrows—yet she is still beautiful in the dignity of her suffering. The 8x10 camera spares no detail, in the strictly parted cap of dark hair pulled back over the ears, in the V-collared cotton print dress, in the grain of the horizontal weatherboarding behind her; wing-shapes in the wood grain pick up the horizontal lines of Allie Mae's mouth and eyes.

Out of the frame next to hers stares her husband Floyd, with three days' growth of beard, and a similar strained expression of dignity despite the tattered and soiled condition of the white broadcloth shirt under his denim overalls. His body is angled away and his head tilts toward us. His collar is turned rather self-consciously, dashingly, it might seem in a different context, revealing at once a glimpse of the handsome farmer's bare shoulder, and a ring of grime within the collar. Did Evans "arrange" the farmer's attire? Probably not. But even so, the heroic young man, brave defender of the vulnerable Allie Mae, looks fit to star in a John Ford western.

Other frames display the cabin interiors, the calendar over the chimneypiece, the kitchen table and kerosene lamp seen through a doorway where a white towel hangs from a nail next to a wooden bowl brimming with light. Sunlight from a rear window silvers the grain of the floorboard. And there is the wrought-iron marriage bed chastely made-up in freshly laundered white sheets above which, on rustic brackets, a shotgun hangs, upside down. In the next frame, *Squeekie Burroughs Asleep*, the baby lies under a gunnysack, on the floor, only a fist and the legs visible, one foot bandaged. Then we see the disturbing picture of a shallow grave, its wooden markers casting long shadows in light that emphasizes the texture of the friable earth.

At last we come to the heart of the exhibit: the squalor of the Fields family—Lily and Bud Fields and their three children—and the wrenching portrait of Katy Tingle. The picture of husband and wife confronts us: the coarse-featured Lily seated on the corner of the bed, holding the sleeping child, the much older Bud, scrawny and bare-chested, with his frowning mustaches, sitting on a chair at the bedfoot, arms folded, legs crossed at the knee; the couple joined compositionally by the barred parallelogram of the bedrail; the soiled ticking of the caseless pillow; the calico bandana carelessly draped around Bud's shoulders. All these details resolve themselves into the piercing gaze of the two pairs of eyes, staring down the lens of Evans's camera. Neither humble nor proud, neither miserable nor content, but with an invincible dignity, the couple ad-

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dresses Evans with the simple request to "take us as we are." Evans himself possessed a contagious dignity, and no doubt he made the most of what they had.

Our eyes are drawn to the bare feet. This photograph, and the companion frame of the same scene adding a prepubescent girl in a grimy smock, a naked toddler, and a wizened, suspicious grandmother, deliberately highlight the family's feet—dirty, calloused, scabbed. These tell the story of the farmer's cruel battle with the earth, with the elements, in an unforgiving time. Only grandmother is shod, in ruined brogans. If Evans had asked her to remove these, for symmetry, the guarded old lady surely would have refused, knowing herself already too much exposed.

Finally we behold the pathetic, foreshortened figure and pleading eyes of Katy Tingle, the childlike old woman dressed in a homemade shift like a baby's gown clasped at the neck and breast with safety pins, unimaginably filthy and ragged, her bare feet on the earth the color of soil, as if she were growing out of the earth, or about to sink into it.

Who took the pictures?

It is time to update the life of Walker Evans III, who went down to Greensboro, Alabama, with the writer James Agee in the summer of 1936, under contract to *Fortune Magazine* to document the plight of tenant farmers. At thirty-three, Evans was one of the most renowned photographers in the world. He was a small man in stature, of graceful movements. His love life was, and would continue to be, as baroque in style as James Agee's Elizabethan prose. Evans had fallen in love with the artist Jane Ninas and was courting her though she was already married. Tactfully but frankly, James Mellow chronicles Evans's homoerotic friendships with John Cheever (who was Evans's assistant), Lincoln Kirstein, and Agee himself—there would be a sexual ménage à trois involving Agee, his wife, and Evans.

Walker Evans married twice and divorced twice and was by all accounts an impossible husband and a mercurial friend. Like many a great artist, Evans was obsessed with his work, preferring it to human interaction. He demanded control. He had the wry expressions, gloom and bad digestion of a cynic, a man who without alcohol suffered the constant vibrations of anxiety. He and Agee were bonded in liquor, which would kill Agee in 1955 and ruin Evans's own health and concentration very soon thereafter.

Evans was a dandy, an aesthete from the crown of his carefully barbered hair to the cap toes of his Peal benchmade shoes. A friend tells the story of Walker on an impulse taking a ship to England, first class, for one weekend to buy shoes. Walker had more shoes in his closet than might be found in many a square mile of Hale County, Alabama. The vision of Walker Evans, with or without the slovenly James Agee, cozying up to these barefoot sharecroppers is picturesque, if not broadly comical. Legend has it that the two men lived with the farmers for weeks to get their stories; Agee may have spent a night or two with them, but Evans stayed in a clean hotel.

Now I do not mean to suggest that the fastidious Evans had to be dragged down to Alabama to photograph the tenant farmers, only that the project was a stretch, a daunting personal challenge. Evans later recalled the assignment was "eagerly grabbed by Agee but not by me."

As for his politics, Evans said:

> The problem is one of staying out of Left politics and still avoiding Establishment patterns. I would not politicize my mind or work. . . . The apostles can't have me.

Of the more sentimental Agee, Evans wrote:

> He scorned the New Deal liberals, the socialists, and the Communists alike; condemned Quakers, trade unionists, and all the rest.

Feeling for the working class was not the

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spark that kindled *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*—it was instinctive human sympathy. Not very religious, Evans stood in awe of Agee's Christianity, which he called

> a naked, root emotion. . . . All you saw of it was an ingrained courtesy, an uncourtly courtesy that emanated from him towards everyone. . . . After a while, in a round-about way, you discovered that, to him, human beings were at least possibly immortal and literally sacred souls.

It was this "root emotion," this courtesy, which Evans caught from Agee like a fever. Agee had the power, Evans recalled, to make strangers not only like him, but also love him. The passion affected Evans, for the time it took to do the work in Alabama. Agee wrote of the desire to humble himself before the farmers, to kiss their feet. Evans would rather get the work done and get the hell out of there, but he was not unmoved by the genuine affection his collaborator aroused in the sharecroppers. They were pulling these aesthetes down to earth at the same time that Agee and Evans were painstakingly finding the nobility in those characters, drawing the Fieldses and the Tingles up with them toward fame and immortality. When Agee and Evans said goodbye at last, the farmers wept. Walker Evans would never go back there. He would never again work in any place where he would find himself so vulnerable, and his later photographs would never approach such sublime heights.

After 1936, Walker Evans's contribution to photography is slender. It is hard to say why there is such a falling off after the fireworks of the first decade. But there are clues to be found in the fourth, U-shaped gallery at the Metropolitan. The dark series *Subway Passengers, New York* (1938–41) that Evans took with a concealed thirty-five millimeter Contax is probing, close shots of mostly middle-class passengers day-dreaming, sleeping, reading newspapers, all terribly lonely, never making eye contact with the skulking photographer, and rarely with one another. The contact sheet displayed in a case reveals that Evans, always a "master of the edge" who cropped and re-formatted his prints so adroitly, had begun to crop his human subjects away from their surroundings and each other, gradually de-contextualizing them. By 1946 when he shot the series of portraits "Labor Anonymous" for *Fortune*, Evans so completely isolated these male pedestrians—homogenizing them, their bored expressions, even their clothing—that they seem like automatons, soldiers on parade in lockstep. Perhaps this is an effective critique of Stalinism; maybe it is in sympathy with the despair of French existentialists. But as pure photography "Labor Anonymous" is a listless shadow of what Evans had done a decade earlier.

Still he was an influence. Robert Frank and Helen Levitt took cues from the "Subway Photographs," and "Labor Anonymous" left its mark on Richard Avedon. But at forty-five, when Evans became the photo editor at *Fortune*, he had lost his passion for the black-and-white photograph. He turned to photographing tin snips, wrenches, and crate openers suspended in space, in the manner of a bored Edward Weston. He shot color stories for *Fortune*: "The Wreckers," which lyrically illustrates the "loving destruction of a building," and "Along the Right of Way," vistas of landscapes glimpsed through a train window. From his boyhood on he had been an avid collector, and this final gallery includes an amusing selection of Evans's vintage postcards and signs, also forty snapshots the old man took with a polaroid in the 1970s, of friends, roadsigns, and kitchen utensils, when he was too ill to manage a serious camera.

Ranking artists is a parlor game, useful mostly for publicists. Though there have been many significant American photographers, the canon of great artists in black-and-white is relatively small, owing to the late invention of the medium and its various constraints—negative size, monochromaticism, the tyranny of "representation." So the

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historical dialectic is straightforward and uncluttered, as the major figures stand out in bold relief: O'Sullivan, Brady, Stieglitz, Steichen, Weston, Strand, Adams, Curtis, Evans, Bourke-White, Lange, Frank, Friedlander, Arbus, and so forth. It would be far more difficult to conjure up such a neat lineage of poets or painters over the past century.

Now having said all of that I must add that if sheer influence is a measure of greatness, Walker Evans must stand near the top of any lists. For it is impossible to imagine twentieth-century photography without him. His more emotionally accessible disciples, Robert Frank, Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Helen Levitt, dominated the field after 1955. It was the Walker Evans of the 1930s who proved once and for all that great photography was the end result of rare culture, reflective vision, and not an accident of hobbyists.

Evans became a professor at Yale in 1964. He advised his students "to have a cultivated life and an education; they'd make better photographs." He considered this especially pertinent to "the psychology of camera work," arguing that "a man who has faith, intelligence, and cultivation will show that in his work." Passion he does not mention, because it cannot be acquired or reliably controlled. Without it there is no enduring art.

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Rosy nights at the opera

by Alexander Coleman

It was quite a shock to take down from my library shelf Joseph Kerman's esteemed study *Opera as Drama* (1956) and be reminded that an opera I love did not pass muster. For Kerman, Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* consists of "four finicky hours of leitmotives, modulations, and program-musical wit." He writes that "the opening tableau is already so enervated in sentiment that the relationship between Octavian and the Marschallin seems as unappetizing as their affectionate nicknames" and that "the scene of the presentation of the rose has all the solidity of a fifty-cent valentine." Moreover, Kerman concludes, "no one who has understood *The Marriage of Figaro* could ever have taken *Der Rosenkavalier* seriously, unless it was Strauss and Hofmannsthal, and even that is not certain."

Strange—all throughout 1999, the fiftieth anniversary year of the death of Richard Strauss, there has been a fulsome celebration of his life and work with the publication in English of no less than *four* full length studies,[1] not to mention the recent reissue of Kurt Wilhelm's richly illustrated study, *Richard Strauss: An Intimate Portrait* (Thames & Hudson). Pace Kerman, *Der Rosenkavalier* occupies an important place in all four of these recently published scholarly examinations, and this constant and seemingly ever increasing interest was confirmed and amplified by a brilliant revival/restoration at the Metropolitan Opera this winter of Nathaniel Merrill's thirty-year-old staging, brushed up and briskly conducted by James Levine. An encore broadcast on PBS of the 1982 version of this same production, featuring Kiri Te Kanawa, Tatiana Troyanos, Judith Blegen, and Luciano Pavarotti, is scheduled to be seen on March 22 of this year. Last but not at all least, the Met is issuing (for a $150 donation) a CD set of a 1951 performance of the opera, featuring Eleanor Steber, Jarmila Novotná, and Erna Berger, all under the imperious baton of Fritz Reiner.

The Met's six performances of an apparently uncut *Der Rosenkavalier* (going from 7:30 P.M. to 12:05 A.M., counting the two intermissions), with a thankfully unchanging cast and with the added public benefit of a matinee broadcast on Saturday, January 29, gave evidence of scrupulous preparation and sensitive casting. The three principal female roles are crucial—in these performances, the trio consisted of mezzo Susan Graham as Octavian, soprano Renée Fleming as the Marschallin, and high soprano (Strauss's term) Heidi Grant Murphy as Sophie. It is a commonplace in Strauss

1 *Richard Strauss*, by Tim Ashley; Phaidon Press, 240 pages, $24.95. *Richard Strauss*, by Matthew Boyden; Northeastern University Press; 431 pages, $29.95. *Richard Strauss: Man, Musician, Enigma*, by Michael Kennedy; Cambridge University Press, 468 pages, $34.95. *The Life of Richard Strauss*, by Bryan Gilliam; Cambridge University Press, 202 pages, $49.95, $15.95 paper.

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criticism that he had a "love affair" with women's voices. Nothing could be more obvious, if we take into account the prominent and exacting demands for the voice in such works as *Salome* (1905), *Elektra* (1909), *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911), on down to the autumnal eloquence of *Capriccio* (1942) and of course the sublime *Four Last Songs* (1948). After all, Strauss's wife, the formidable soprano Pauline de Ahna, was a renowned performer in her time. She sang at Bayreuth at the invitation of Cosima Wagner, and accompanied Strauss in a concert tour of the United States in 1904, giving some thirty-five song recitals. Although she left behind no recordings and stopped performing after the American tour, we have some idea of what she sounded like. The curmudgeonly critic Eduard Hanslick, the bane of Wagner's existence, reviewed a Vienna recital of Pauline de Ahna, accompanied by her husband. Hanslick exclaimed, "Frau de Ahna's excellently trained, rich, sweet soprano did our hearts good! We may surely call her his better and more beautiful half." We may rightfully presume that there is a musical agenda behind Hanslick's praise. Just prior to Frau Strauss's recital, he had once again displayed his anti-Wagnerian stance by drubbing her husband's tone poem *Ein Heldenleben* on the occasion of its Vienna premiere.

The particular voice timbre preferred by Strauss, both "rich" and "sweet," can be heard, for instance, in the 1933 abridged recording of *Der Rosenkavalier*, featuring Maria Olczewska as Octavian, Lotte Lehmann as the Marschallin, and the Sophie of Elisabeth Schumann. It was no surprise that Strauss should describe Lotte Lehmann as "the ideal interpreter of my operas." Closer to our times, another kind of preferred timbre can be heard in the voice of Ljuba Welitsch, the Bulgarian soprano whom Strauss had personally coached just before a performance of *Salome* at the Vienna State Opera in 1944. Five years later, in 1949, Welitsch made a stunning monophonic recording of the final scene from *Salome*, accompanied by Fritz Reiner and the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra—a performance that still occupies a special place in the now wildly abundant Strauss discography. Even closer to our times are such singers as Hilde Gueden, Sena Jurinac, Maria Reining, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Lisa della Casa, and Teresa Stich-Randall, naming only six singers and thus unfairly excluding so many other distinguished Marschallins, Octavians, and Sophies from the past three decades.

Each individual voice here mentioned might collectively give us the ideal composite Strauss soprano or mezzo. How to describe what he wanted? In spite of the sometimes hypertrophic orchestral accompaniment supporting his sopranos and mezzos during this period of Strauss's compositions, it can be said that Strauss was always searching for something different from a Wagnerian singer, typified by the opulence and majesty we now associate with Kirsten Flagstad and, more recently, Birgit Nilsson. Again and again, scholars find the composer begging for a relatively light, silvery voice —not thin, but penetrating and able to cut through the rich orchestral fabric. For instance, he wanted, paradoxically, a light and capricious singer for his ideal Salome, with a "childish charm" and a "latent sensuality," in the words of Michael Kennedy.

In this regard, the young Herbert von Karajan recalled that Strauss once complained to him: "Nowadays all the heavy voices are singing *Salome*. It's all gone out of control. I *don't* want this!" In this sense, Welitsch was perfect, giving out a sense of girlish passion—with touches of the sinister—hovering over a purposefully turgid and declamatory orchestral web. This kind of voice is also particularly suited to the operas of Strauss's beloved idol Mozart, at odds with the voices needed for the operas of Strauss's youthful infatuation, Wagner. It must always be kept in mind that Strauss, as conductor and sometime head of the opera houses in Berlin and Vienna in his maturity, was primarily responsible for the return of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* to the European opera house repertory, the work having

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been relegated to oblivion by misguided romantic ideas about Mozart as the composer of a powdered rococo trifle.

Keeping in mind the relevance still of Strauss's sonic ideal, the trio of singers heard at the Met's first performance of the season and the matinee broadcast were all nicely bright in tone with the always appropriate metallic edge during dialogue and ensembles. This listener had the distinct impression that Susan Graham as Octavian gave the most forceful characterization within the trio, while Renée Fleming was a distanced, pure-toned, and occasionally inaudible Marschallin of slightly less than majestic carriage in the last act. The difficult role of Sophie, a vapid ninny if there ever was one, had a fine interpreter in Heidi Grant Murphy; her hard tone complemented the more rounded timbres of the other two.

As for the Ochs von Lerchenau of Franz Hawlata, it was good to see a baron of less than Falstaffian girth. Nevertheless, there were slapstick touches that really went beyond the pale. Long ago, having learned some hard lessons from witnessing innumerable productions of the opera, Strauss himself warned both singers and directors that

> most basses have presented [Ochs] as a disgusting vulgar monster with a repellent mask and proletarian manners. . . . This is quite wrong: Ochs must be a rustic beau of thirty-five, who is after all a member of the gentry, if somewhat countrified.

The impression given at the Met was that the singer had fallen into coarseness, both musical and visual; there was no sense of ironic pomp or the comic deflation that the role suggests.

The orchestra under Maestro Levine cannot be sufficiently praised, above all in the deft realization of the "Introduction and Pantomime" music at the beginning of Act III, marked to be played "as fast as possible." I am reminded of rule number nine of Strauss's not-quite-to-be-taken-seriously *Ten Golden Rules for the Album of a Young Conductor*: "When you think you have reached the limits of *prestissimo*, double the pace." Levine and the orchestra did just that. He is a master of this complex score, and the performance was nothing if not efficient, though it could hardly be said to exude charm and *gemütlichkeit* at all times.

Performance styles change. For instance, to what extent can we take as authoritative a particular recording that a composer such as Strauss has made of one of his works? In an interview with Paul Myers of the then Columbia Records, George Szell remembered Strauss's conductorial performances as "very often perfunctory. He might be aglow and aflame directing *Così fan tutte*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Walküre*, or *Fidelio*, but intensely *boring* with *Der Rosenkavalier* or *Salome*. It would seem that the music had lost interest for him the moment he had finished with it."

This impression is further confirmed by available film excerpts of Strauss conducting portions of *Der Rosenkavalier*. They are remarkably uninflected and unemphatic. The conductor Fritz Busch noted that "Nothing annoyed [Strauss] more than when conductors wallowed in his lyrical outpourings." If anything characterizes contemporary interpretations of *Der Rosenkavalier* such as Levine's or, say, Bernstein's and Solti's, it is that they have much more heft and gravity than those produced during Strauss's lifetime. They also tend to dawdle, as Strauss never did. He just wanted to get back into the wings to continue his favorite card game, "Skat." In this sense, Robert Heger's blithe, fluent conducting of the abridged 1933 *Der Rosenkavalier* stands either as an admirable performance ideal or one that, by our standards today, is insufficiently pointed, without springy accents.

One last and not at all minor detail: Strauss's ideal Ochs von Lerchenau, Richard Mayr (who was prevented from singing in the 1911 premiere because of contractual obligations), finally recorded his stupendous reading of the role in this 1933 record-

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ing. You only have to see a few minutes of the *Rosenkavalier* video filmed at Salzburg in 1962 under Herbert von Karajan, and featuring one of Mayr's heirs apparent, Otto Edelmann, in the role of Ochs, to realize how the projection of porcine gallantry can work on the stage without any heavy burlesque. This elusive touch in a performer is what Alan Rich called the "tastefully controlled low comedy of Edelmann's Ochs." As the Marschallin so clearly states at the end of Act 1, "Leicht muss man sein, mit leichtem Herzen und leichten Händen," ("One must take it lightly, with light heart and light hands").

Our four Strauss scholars seem to agree that, after the blaring dissonances of *Elektra*, which certified Strauss as an avant-gardist, both librettist and composer enthusiastically declared a "time out" to indulge in an exercise of what might be called the anachronistic imagination. As one critic put it, Strauss "had had enough of murder and perversion." It was necessary to follow *Elektra* with a "Mozart" opera, a "psychological comedy with both mischievous and sweet characters, and, like a Beaumarchais play, containing round misunderstandings, love's complications, and disguises in which nobody recognizes anybody," as George R. Marek said. It must have been irresistible for both Hofmannsthal and Strauss to go back to an imagined time where, at the proper distance, courtly punctilio was observed in the text, if not in the music. The elaborate polyphony, occasional orchestral surfeit, and what Strauss himself admitted were "longueurs"—plus the waltzes outrageously inappropriate for an eighteenth-century setting—all these matters were grave problems for a few observers, in spite of the wholesale acclaim.

Strauss recognized his tendency to varnish his music. As Norman del Mar noted in his definitive three-volume study of Strauss's music,

> [An] absolute mastery of technique had, of course, its own special dangers. He could scarcely look at a page of score without new counterpoints suggesting themselves instantly to him, a "verdammte Begabung," as he described it, a damned gift which he was well aware prompted him often to overfill his scores.

Along the same lines, Thomas Mann wrote an enraged letter of sympathy to Hofmannsthal after the premiere. Mann was inconsolable:

> What in God's name do you really feel about the way Strauss has loaded and stretched your airy structure? A charming joke weighed down by four hours of din! . . . Where is Vienna, where is the eighteenth century in this music? Hardly in the waltzes. They are anachronistic, and put the stamp of operetta on the entire work. . . . Not a word can be heard.

It should be said that the conductor at the 1911 premiere, Ernst von Schuch, was renowned for drowning out his singers. At the Met, the text came across with distinct enunciation, except for the moments when one of the singers had to race through a part as written by Strauss. The result is a Straussian "gabble," something of which he was very aware, and which is impossible to understand, no matter what language the opera might be sung in. As Strauss so ruefully admitted in his recollections of the first performances of the opera, "The evening was a little long drawn out, since, in my enthusiasm, I had composed the whole of the somewhat talkative text without alteration, although even the author had expected me to make cuts."

Still, unlike most opera librettos, Hofmannsthal's deserves close scrutiny beforehand. As Mr. Gilliam perceptively notes in his straightforward biography of Strauss, the opera is

> about time and transformation on multiple levels. . . . Octavian himself takes on various transformations, as the Marschallin's adolescent lover, as her chambermaid, as a rose cavalier, and—by the end—as a wiser young

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> man. . . . To Hofmannsthal, the miracle of life is that an old love can die, while a new one can arise in its ashes.

Moreover, there is more in the way of social commentary than is generally recognized. Hofmannsthal knew all about acquired nobility and sudden social ascension. As Ilse Barea tells the story in her still useful book on Vienna, the founder of the Hofmannsthal fortune centuries back, a silk merchant from Prague, came to Vienna and, once ennobled by the court, endearingly chose for his coat of arms a mulberry leaf (symbol of the silk industry) for one field of the escutcheon, and the tablets of the Mosaic law for the other. This man's son married an Italian woman and converted to Catholicism. Further on down the genealogical line, Hugo von Hofmannsthal grew up as a Catholic, but was conscious of his Jewish ancestry: *arrivisme* was in the air. Theodor W. Adorno, in his scrutiny of the correspondence between Stefan George and Hofmannsthal, gave an acid portrait of the ambitious pretensions of the young Hofmannsthal:

> It is the diligent cosmopolitanism of the young gentleman of good family, the model which Hofmannsthal later used in stylizing his own past, a legend from the very first. His is the laxity of one who identifies with the aristocracy, or at least with that kind of upper-class society which shares most of its interests and knows its way around.

In his time, Hofmannsthal was able to observe the turn-of-the-century equivalents of a few wistful Marschallins of a certain age, accompanied by their passionate Italianate loves such as Octavian Rofrano. Also within his salon scrutiny were such types as the ambitious Faninal and his newly eligible daughter Sophie, she just out of the convent (as was the Marschallin before her arranged marriage a few decades before). In the opera, all of the foregoing characters are soon to be put to the test by the intrusion of the rough-hewn blueblood Ochs von Lerchenau, intent as he is of making use of his decrepit title to liquidate some long-standing debts by means of a suitable marriage to Sophie. In turn, pater Faninal, recently enriched as a purveyor to the troops in Flanders and possessor of twelve rentable houses, needs Ochs for his ascension in Viennese society just as much as Ochs needs financial relief. Social ambitions collude with the financial need of a wasted aristocracy. The same interaction between arrivistes and proud bluebloods occurs in Lampedusa's *The Leopard*.

Strauss himself, the son of the horn player Franz Strauss (who had risen in society by marrying the heiress of a Munich brewery), contracted marriage with the imperious daughter of an army general. Pauline de Ahna never permitted her composer-husband to forget his relative social inferiority within the echelons of Bavarian society. By most accounts (those of Alma and Gustav Mahler, Pauline Dehmel, and Lotte Lehmann), it was a bizarre marriage. Lehmann was the most devastating witness: Frau Strauss called him a peasant and their marriage a *mésalliance*; she could have had a dashing hussar, and his music couldn't compare with that of Massenet. Richard refused to be ruffled: "'Believe me, Lotte,' he said to me the day I was leaving, 'the whole world's admiration interests me a great deal less than a single one of Pauline's fits of rage.'" It is true that he prided himself in playing out the role of Bavarian bumpkin. In this regard, Hofmannsthal's description of Strauss in a letter to a friend sounds strangely like the Marschallin in her confrontations with Ochs:

> [Strauss] is such an incredibly unrefined person, he has such a frightful bent toward triviality and kitsch . . . an extraordinarily mixed character, but vulgarity rises in him as easily as groundwater.

The baffling marriage takes up a considerable amount of space in these four studies of Strauss; other points in common are the nature of his changing collabora-

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tions with Hofmannsthal up until the latter's tragic death in 1929; the mixed fortunes of Strauss's post-Hofmannsthal collaborations with Stefan Zweig, Josef Gregor, and Clemens Krauss; his ongoing interest in lieder composition and orchestral works, culminating in the final instrumental masterpiece, the *Metamorphosen* for twenty-three solo strings, composed in 1944–45.

If any major distinctions are to be made among these four books on Strauss, they lie in the varying interpretations and emphases on the relationship of Strauss to the Nazis. It is notoriously well known that the composer carried out a cynical dalliance with the movement known as National Socialism: he occupied official posts in their cultural ministry, was photographed effusively shaking hands with Goebbels, and wrote a fawning letter to Hitler. It is less well known that his only son Franz had married a woman of part-Jewish ancestry, that the couple was constantly threatened with arrest and deportation (and in fact was arrested for a short time), that Strauss's grandchildren wore the yellow star of David to school in Garmisch, thereby inciting the local toughs against them and the whole family, in spite of their eminence. Foolishly thinking, as did Wilhelm Furtwängler, that an accommodation with the regime was possible in the Thirties, Strauss got his comeuppance in the early Forties. By then, he was formally declared non grata, and indeed underwent a confrontational excoriation personally delivered by Goebbels: "Stop all your claptrap about the importance of serious music, once and for all. Tomorrow's art is different from yesterday's. You, Herr Strauss, belong to yesterday!"

All four Strauss scholars try to be fair each in their own way with this ignominious twelve-year-long episode. Michael Kennedy is the most judicious and balanced, bordering on the apologetic. Mr. Ashley sees Strauss as flailing between two extremes: "On occasion, he acted out of self-interest, or, even worse, personal spite; there were other times when he was, without question, deliberately persecuted and emotionally blackmailed." Matthew Boyden's study, especially rich on the cultural background of Strauss's youth and adolescence, contains the most unrelentingly negative portrait of Strauss as a man. It must be said that the facts do not have to be at all twisted by any observer to make the man Strauss into a cold, calculating machine for luxuriant musical composition. As Boyden sourly notes,

> the unease to which he was prone during his last four years does point towards the existence of a conscience, but it might just as easily be argued that he was fearful for the future of his music in a world hateful to anyone and anything connected with Hitler's Reich.

As for the other three studies: Kennedy's is the most encyclopedic, while Ashley and Gilliam work with the same material in a more elegant and selective manner.

None of these academic studies can answer what Fritz Busch called in 1949

> the puzzle of Strauss, who in spite of his marvellous talents is not really penetrated and possessed by them like other great artists but, in fact, simply wears them like a suit of clothes which can be taken off at will—this puzzle neither I nor anyone else has yet succeeded in solving.

Strauss himself, in an uncommonly blunt moment of self-assessment, told Stefan Zweig in 1934 that

> what suits me best, South German bourgeois that I am, are sentimental jobs; but such bull's eyes as the *Arabella* duet and the *Der Rosenkavalier* trio don't happen every day. Must one become seventy years old to recognize that one's greatest strength lies in creating kitsch?

Not at all in his dotage, can the composer himself have been that far wrong?

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Between head & heart: Penelope Fitzgerald's novels

by Tess Lewis

All accidents of our lives are materials out of which we can make whatever we like. One who has much intelligence will make much of his life. Every acquaintance, every incident might, for a thoroughly gifted person, become the first link of an infinite series, the beginning of an unending novel.
—Novalis, *Pollen*

Penelope Fitzgerald is anything but an autobiographical novelist. Yet four of her nine novels have grown directly from personal experiences. Her various positions as a clerk in a bookstore, as a sound assistant at the BBC during the Second World War, and as a teacher of child actors gave rise respectively to *The Bookshop* (1978), *Human Voices* (1980), and *At Freddie's* (1982). Fitzgerald's third novel, *Offshore*, which won the Booker Prize in 1979, is set on the Battersea Reach of the Thames where Fitzgerald herself lived on an old wooden barge until it sank. These early novels owe much of their success not only to the quaint charm of their settings —and there is plenty of that—but also to the unsparing precision of Fitzgerald's observations.

She is sharp, but compassionate, softening the bite of her remarks with gentle humor. In *Human Voices*, she described the British Broadcasting Corporation, an institution with a personality of its own, as a "cross between a civil service, a powerful moral force, and an amateur theatrical company that wasn't too sure where next week's money was coming from." The barge dwellers in *Offshore* aspire to houses on shore, sensible occupations, and adequate amounts of money, but

> a certain failure, distressing to themselves, to be like other people, caused them to sink back, with so much else that drifted or was washed up, into the mud moorings of the great tideway. Biologically they could be said, as most tideline creatures are, to be "successful." They were not easily dislodged.

Fitzgerald's early novels portray self-contained worlds with which she is intimately familiar. It is a measure of Fitzgerald's talent, then, that her later novels, set in increasingly distant periods and places and thus more intensely imagined, are even richer and more vivid. *Innocence* (1986) is set in Florence in the 1950s. Both *The Beginning of Spring* (1988) and *The Gate of Angels* (1990) take place on the eve of the First World War, with the first set in Moscow and the second in Cambridge, England. Her most recent novel, *The Blue Flower* (1998) spans seven years in provincial Saxony in the 1790s.

Fitzgerald's sensibility is an elusive one, suggestive rather than explanatory. In her fragmented, episodic narratives much of the story's action occurs offstage and significant effort is required of the reader to appreciate the subtleties and resonances within her relatively brief novels. Perhaps this is why,

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despite her longstanding success in Britain, she has only recently gained widespread recognition in the United States. *The Blue Flower* won not only the National Book Critics Circle Award, but also a surprising amount of critical attention and number of devoted readers for an elliptical novel about a difficult German poet. With the U.S. publication of *The Golden Child* (1977), *Human Voices*, and *At Freddie's*, American readers are finally able to appreciate the extraordinary range of her fiction. For the first time, all of her novels are in print here.[1]

All but the first of Fitzgerald's nine novels are woven from the accidents of her characters' lives. Incidents and incidentals rather than formal plots or tidy story lines govern the books. The effect of one character's personality upon another's is often more momentous and more interesting than anything a particular character does. Fitzgerald's gift lies in her ability to create charged dramas of intimacy from apparently unremarkable material. These dramas gain their particular poignancy from the discrepancy between the amused detachment of her narrative voice and the bleakness of the situation described. Her characteristically British understatement and reserve, along with an unfailingly light touch, lend her books their deceptive simplicity.

Always a reticent stylist, Fitzgerald has further refined and pared down her style with each of her books. And yet her later books, though increasingly spare, are denser and more complex. Her approach to spiritual and moral matters is clear-eyed, pragmatic, and compassionate, yet so discreet that the depth of her concerns is easily overlooked. There are no distinctly calibrated moral scales in Fitzgerald's fiction, but rather carefully modulated shades of gray. Virtues, like vices, are double-edged. Innocence, for example, is rarely without cruelty. Her brand of heroism is an endurance that comes perilously close to self-destructive obstinacy. A form of divine grace—barely distinguishable from chance—does operate upon her characters' lives, but not always obviously to their advantage.

The spiritual manifests itself in Fitzgerald's books most evidently in the relations between her characters—more specifically in the love affairs in her later works. Love, in Fitzgerald's books, serves as a barometer of the characters' self-knowledge. It is rarely requited, and when it is, even for the most self-aware, it is often unsatisfactory. Most of her early works feature infatuations tangential to the main story lines. But with her sixth novel, *Innocence*, love becomes not only the dominant subject of her novels, but also their catalyzing force. The story of Novalis's transforming love for Sophie von Kühn in *The Blue Flower* is a natural culmination of this progression in Fitzgerald's fiction.

Penelope Fitzgerald began her writing career with a biography of the Pre-Raphaelite Edward Burne-Jones and a group portrait of her father and his three brothers. The four Knox brothers were sons of an Evangelical bishop. The oldest, E. V. Knox, Penelope's father, renowned for his comic verse, served as the editor of *Punch* for over a decade. Dillwyn, the second born, was a gifted classicist and cryptographer. He almost single-handedly reconstructed and translated the racy Mimes of Herodas from previously indecipherable ancient Greek fragments. He was also instrumental in solving the German flag-code in the First World War and the Enigma in the Second. The two younger sons, Wilfred and Ronald, became priests, but to their father's dismay the older was ordained in the Anglo-Catholic Church and the younger in the Roman Catholic Church. Ronald, a witty, prolific, and celebrated writer, became the Church's main unofficial spokesman to Britain's great Catholic families. Although these men are much more remarkable than Fitzgerald's fictional characters, *The Knox Brothers* (1977) reads very much like one of

1 Over the last three years, Mariner Books, the paperback reprint imprint of Houghton Mifflin, have brought out all nine of Fitzgerald's novels in a uniform edition.

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her novels. Episodes from the four men's lives are interwoven with the same aphoristic commentary that runs through her fiction and marks her as a direct descendant of Jane Austen. When describing her father's rather spartan childhood, she observed that "[h]ardship never destroys a family if the parents share it." Later, she noted her uncle Ronald's despair at the "English genius for irreligion—the comfortable feeling that there is a good deal of truth in all religions, but not enough to affect practical conduct."

In *The Knox Brothers*, Fitzgerald directly raised a question that returned indirectly, but ever more insistently, in her novels: "If we are creatures of reason, what are we to do with our hearts?" The struggle to accommodate the unreasonable demands of the emotions with logic and common sense creates the dramatic tension in her fiction. And she turns to love as the most tangible and common intrusion of the irrational into our lives and those of her characters.

Fitzgerald came to fiction almost indirectly. At the age of sixty, she wrote her first novel, a satirical murder mystery, in order to entertain her husband who was suffering from terminal cancer. Set in a large institution resembling the British Museum, *The Golden Child* is an entertaining, giddy send-up of blockbuster exhibitions, international art scholarship, and the quite literally internecine politics of the museum administration.

The rather convoluted plot, although not completely satisfying in itself, is a perfect vehicle for Fitzgerald's humor and her social commentary. Decades before today's excesses, she skewers the museum as cultural temple in the age of the mega-show and the temples' high priests, those keepers of various departments interested only in expanding their power and their collections regardless of cost or quality. Nor does she spare academia, with her Derridean-Althusserian figure *avant la lettre*, Dr. Tite-Live Rochegrosse-Bergson, the well-dressed anti-structuralist turned philosopher-criminal from Poubelle-sur-Loire or the eminent German scholar, Professor Untermensch, author of *Garamantischengeheimschriftendechiffrierkunst*, a monograph on the art of deciphering Garamantian pictographs.

The hero, Waring Smith, a hapless junior officer, is the first of Fitzgerald's staple characters, an innocent buffeted by forces he fails to understand but counters with an unexpected amount of resilience. He is hopelessly in love with his dissatisfied wife, and, although he can explain his determination to hold onto his job in the museum only as a reaction to threatening notices from the bank holding his mortgage, he is deeply committed to serving a public he feels the museum is treating disrespectfully. His devotion is nothing short of heroic, but, as so often in Fitzgerald's fiction, his heroism is one of quiet endurance.

Fitzgerald's second novel, *The Bookshop*, appeared one year later. The widow Florence Green can no more explain her commitment to an apparently hopeless cause than Waring Smith. Green has decided to open a bookstore in the unreceptive East Suffolk village of Hardborough, and with each obstacle, her determination grows. It is the late 1950s and paperbacks are still a relatively new phenomenon, offering, like the mega-show in *The Golden Child*, a relatively accessible approach to culture. And yet, aside from the general ill-will of her fellow villagers who resist any kind of change, Florence's main obstacle is Violet Gamart, ostensibly one of Hardborough's most cultured inhabitants. She is the wife of a retired general, tirelessly struggling and scheming her way to the top of the social ladder. Mrs. Gamart had long decided that Hardborough needed an arts center but is only spurred to action when Florence buys the "Old House," a decrepit structure dating from the fifteenth-century. Florence renovates this almost uninhabitable ruin for her bookshop, simply making it even more attractive for Mrs. Gamart's scheme. Florence is no match for Violet Gamart with her wealth and parliamentary connections.

In fact, with her good will, Florence is no match for anyone at all. In Fitzgerald's harshest comment on social relations, she

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noted that Florence "blinded herself . . . by pretending for a while that human beings are not divided into exterminators and exterminatees, with the former, at any given moment predominating." *The Bookshop* is Fitzgerald's darkest novel and contains her most malevolent characters, the self-righteously determined Violet Gamart and the opportunistic Milo North who, under the guise of helping Florence, gathers information for Mrs. Gamart's campaign against her. They are treated firmly but gently. Human weakness, in Fitzgerald's novels, is to be expected and understood but is not explained away.

In *Offshore*, Fitzgerald's focus was drawn to what, in her later novels, proved to be her true subject: the intimate relations between people and the ways in which they make each other miserable despite their very best intentions. In Fitzgerald's fiction, the most concise statement about marriage is made by Florence in *The Bookshop* when Milo asks if her marriage had been a happy one. A very happy one, she replies: "I loved [my husband], and tried to understand his work. It sometimes strikes me that men and women aren't quite the right people for each other." *Offshore* vividly illustrates this principle.

Nenna James, a thirty-two-year-old former violin student with two children, is living literally and figuratively on *Grace*. She bought the barge on a whim while her husband, Edward, a perennially unsuccessful engineer, was working in Panama for a year. When Edward returned, having proven himself once again unable to earn a living, he stubbornly refused to join her and his daughters. Nenna, with equal stubbornness, refuses to leave *Grace*. And so for years, the two have lived in a state of marital limbo, unable to live with or without each other.

Here again Fitzgerald created a colorful cast of minor characters, who not only provide a sense of life on the far margins of early 1960s London, but also variations on the novel's *leitmotiv*. There is Richard, the fastidious, morally upright, and married neighbor on the *Lord Jim* with whom Nenna has a brief and unconcluded affair; Maurice, a lonely and incurably idealistic homosexual prostitute; and the marine painter Willis, desperately trying to sell his leaking boat before it sinks. *Offshore* offers no explanation, consolation, or even conclusion to the perennial struggle between the mind and the heart. Edward may well find Nenna. Or perhaps Richard will. Either way there will be no easy solution. Men and women are often not quite the right people for each other. Nonetheless, they are the best they have.

With *Human Voices* and *At Freddie's*, Fitzgerald returned to the satirical vein, but gently so. We find the usual entertaining casts of side characters, misfits and eccentrics, yet in these two novels they come perilously close to overwhelming the books with amusing but distracting anecdotes. *Human Voices* takes place during a few months of the London Blitz. Its theme is the quiet heroism of ordinary people in the service of a higher cause. This heroism, like the causes it serves, can be paradoxical and idiosyncratic. The BBC "was in fact dedicated to the strangest project of the war, or of any war, that is, telling the truth," even though "truth ensures trust, but not victory, or even happiness."

The eponymous Frieda Wentworth of *At Freddie's* is the director of a children's acting school, known as Freddie's. She is a purist devoted to training her charges in Shakesperean acting even at the financial peril of her institution. She is shrewd, ruthless, and willfully difficult for she knows that she "herself had fulfilled the one sure condition of being loved by the English nation, that is, she had been going on a very long time." Like the employees of the BBC, she, too, is devoted to a cause but whether her primary cause is the theater or simply the perpetuation of her own power is unclear.

One of Freddie's teachers, a young Irishman named Hugh Carroll, has devoted himself to an even more tenuous cause: his love for his fellow teacher Hannah Graves.

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Carroll, a man of unusual incompetence ("He could only be himself, and that not very successfully"), nonetheless reveals a surprising level of inner strength, if not existential heroism, in his unrequited devotion. Devotion in its purest form is shown by Jonathan, one of Freddie's prodigies. The novel closes with Jonathan practicing a scene from "King John" in which the young Prince Arthur falls to his death. Having locked himself out of the school on a winter's night to practice jumping from the back wall, he continues "climbing and jumping, again and again and again into the darkness."

With *Innocence*, Fitzgerald's novels become more weighted. In her later books, she is just as adept at creating colorful characters and a rich atmosphere, but she integrates her supporting cast much more fully into the novels' dramatic action. She is thus able to develop her themes with more subtlety and complexity. Her main theme, again, is the perplexing play of emotion and reason, but each of the three novels offers different variations and elaborations. In *Innocence*, *The Beginning of Spring*, and *The Gate of Angels*, Fitzgerald presents three determinedly rational heros—a doctor, the director of a printing press, and a physicist. Each man is smitten with love so powerfully that his worldview is utterly shaken.

Innocence, happiness, and contentment are the variations with which Fitzgerald toys in the first of these novels. Dr. Salvatore Rossi is a native Sicilian who has worked hard to leave the provinces and establish himself as a neurologist in Florence. His mother was a devout Catholic and his father an ardent Communist and follower of Gramsci. Rossi has rejected both systems of belief for the certainties of medicine. Paradoxically, he specializes in neuralgia, symptoms of pain with no explicable cause.

Rossi's rationalism is hard-won and he is easily thrown into confusion. When he meets Chiara Ridolfi, the beautiful young daughter of an impoverished aristocratic family, during the intermission of a concert, he immediately falls in love. He is, however, paralyzed by the strength of his emotions. Chiara's determination is stronger than his confusion and, following a series of misunderstandings, the two marry. The pessimistic Rossi is helpless before Chiara's innocent expectation that they will be happy together. He is happy, unbearably so. "A serious, thinking adult has no defence against innocence because he was obliged to respect it, whereas the innocent scarcely knows what respect is, or seriousness either," Rossi complains.

The existence of inscrutable higher orders, spiritual and political, and the havoc they wreak on a determinedly rational understanding of life forms the underpinning of Fitzgerald's Russian novel, *The Beginning of Spring*. It is the novel of one man's emotional rebirth on the eve of his adopted country's rebirth in the Russian Revolution. Frank Reid is an Englishman born and raised in Moscow, where he has taken over his father's printing press. He is open-minded but pragmatic, perhaps a shade too pragmatic. His accountant Selwyn Crane, a poet and disciple of Tolstoy, tells Frank that his one flaw is a failure of the imagination: his inability to "grasp the importance of what is beyond sense or reason."

Frank's wife Nellie has unexpectedly abandoned him and their three children for a Tolstoyan commune in England. In Nellie's absence Frank falls in love with Lisa Ivanovna, an inscrutable Russian woman brought in to take care of the children. Lisa, who meets her cult-like following among the birch trees at night, disappears without a trace just before Nellie returns. Although Frank has been immeasurably altered by his passion for Lisa, a reconciliation with Nellie is not impossible.

Discussions of God and the soul are more overt in *The Beginning of Spring* than in any other of Fitzgerald's novels. Yet she maintained a delicate balance between the sublime and the ridiculous. Without diminishing the importance and complexity of the metaphysical, she showed that it can function as reason by other rules. Frank's old

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Russian servant explains to him that he is

> Not an unbeliever, sir, a free-thinker. Perhaps you've never thought about the difference. As a free-thinker I can believe what I like, when I like. I can commit you, in your situation, to the protection of God this evening, even though tomorrow morning I shan't believe that he exists. As an unbeliever I should be obliged not to believe, and that's an unwarrantable restriction on my thoughts.

The genius for irreligion comes in many variations.

The spiritual plays a prominent role in *The Gate of Angels*, but in a more traditional framework. The conflict between faith and rationality in 1912, the age of Ernest Rutherford, Niels Bohr, and Max Planck, provides a backdrop against which Fitzgerald builds a meditation on the extent to which luck and chance or grace operate in our lives.

Fred Fairly is a junior fellow at the fictional Cambridge College of St. Angelicus (or Angels, for short). The son of a rector and once an earnest choirboy, Fred has resolved to rely exclusively upon "observables." Although he considers himself "a man with a mind cleared and perpetually being recleared (because there was a constant need for that) of any idea that could not be tested through physical experience," his rejection of Christianity is only provisional. On his way home one night, Fred is knocked unconscious in a cycling accident. He wakes up in a strange bed next to a young woman named Daisy and falls in love with her at once. Daisy, who wears a wedding band to protect her from unwanted advances in her lower-class London neighborhood, has come to Cambridge looking for work after being dismissed from her job as a nurse's assistant. A generous, well-meaning soul, she had violated the hospital rules on patient privacy in order to help one in her care. On the night of the accident, Daisy was on her way to an assignation with the muckraking journalist who not only had gotten her into her predicament, but also intends to take full advantage of her distress.

As a fellow of a celibate college, Fred would forfeit his position with marriage. He is in the grip of forces he cannot understand, but can certainly observe. Heedless of the professional consequences, he courts Daisy assiduously. Fred's suit survives a number of misunderstandings similar to those that plagued Salvatore and Chiara and is increasingly successful until the journalist reappears to destroy Daisy's reputation. Fred desperately tries to draw an explanation from Daisy, but is unable to overcome her conviction that she can do him no good. Both resign themselves to life without the other. On her way to the train station, however, Daisy is delayed five minutes by a cry of distress coming from Angels. So, by chance, grace, or clockwork, Fred and Daisy meet and, perhaps, reconcile.

The mysteries of the human heart and spirit are indistinguishable in *The Blue Flower. Die blaue Blume*, the blue flower that became the German romantics' central symbol of yearning for spiritual fulfillment, came from Novalis's unfinished novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. In this reworking of the Orpheus myth, an impoverished poet wins the love of a princess and a kingdom with his verse. Fitzgerald worked this novel's transforming passage more than once into her own.

> "It was not the thought of the treasure which stirred up such unspeakable longings in me," he said to himself. "I have no craving to be rich, but I long to see the Blue Flower. It lies incessantly at my heart, and I can imagine and think about nothing else."

Like Heinrich von Ofterdingen's, Novalis's life was utterly transformed twice. This German romantic philosopher-poet, was born Friedrich ("Fritz") von Hardenberg in 1772, the oldest of eleven children. His father was a deeply pious minor aristocrat who was named the director of the Saxon Salt Mining Administration after serving in

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the Seven Years' War. Fritz was a dull-witted, backward boy of nine when a serious childhood illness turned him into a precocious, lively young student. He eventually studied law, chemistry, history, and philosophy at the universities of Jena, Leipzig, and Wittenberg. In Jena he studied—enthusiastically, but not uncritically—Fichte's philosophy of solipsistic idealism. (Fitzgerald has Fritz parody Fichte in one of several amusing passages. "Gentlemen! Look at the washbasket! Let your thought be the washbasket! Have you thought the washbasket? Now then, gentlemen, let your thought be on *that* that thought the washbasket!") While in Jena, Fritz befriended the two Schlegels, Schelling, and Ludwig Tieck and found himself in the hothouse of German romanticism. Nine years after his childhood illness, a chance acquaintance caused the second transformation of his life. In 1794, Fritz met his fate, his "wisdom," his "philosophy," in the guise of a rather ordinary twelve-year-old named Sophie von Kühn. This meeting and Novalis's love for a girl destined to die of tuberculosis two years later form the basis of *The Blue Flower*. A mere seven years of a brief life—Novalis died at the age of twenty-eight—provide more than ample material for Fitzgerald to bring to life a handful of historical figures and their period.

With each of her novels, and most markedly since *Innocence*, Fitzgerald's writing has grown increasingly condensed, but also richer in texture. It is difficult to explain how she so vividly creates sensuous worlds with such economy. Her judicious use of description and detail evokes distant times and places with far greater immediacy than pages of description or historical explanation. *The Blue Flower* is her *tour de force* of this technique. She opens with a washday scene. A blizzard of laundry falls from the upper windows of the Hardenberg home. The quantity and quality of the linen reveal not only the size of the Hardenberg household, but also their economic and social status and their yearly rituals.

> [Fritz's friend] could tell from the great dingy snowfalls of sheets, pillowcases, bolster-cases, vests, bodices, drawers, from the upper windows into the courtyard, where grave-looking servants, both men and women, were receiving them into giant baskets, that they washed only once a year. This might mean wealth, in fact he knew that in this case it didn't, but it was certainly an indication of long standing. A numerous family, also. The underwear of children and young persons, as well as the larger sizes, fluttered through the blue air, as though the children themselves had taken to flight.

The elaborate dinners served in the chaos of Sophie's home are lovingly described.

> One [soup was] made of beer, sugar and eggs, one of rosehips and onions, one of bread and cabbage-water, one of cows' udders flavoured with nutmeg. There was dough mixed with beech-nut oil, pickled herrings and goose with treacle sauce, hard-boiled eggs, numerous dumplings. It is dangerous—on this, at least, all Germany's physicians were agreed—not to keep the stomach full at all times.

You can almost smell the Tennstedt county fair, "specialising in *Kesselfleisch*—the ears, snout and strips of fat from the pig's neck boiled with peppermint schnapps. Great iron kettles dispersed the odours of pig sties and peppermint."

For all the novel's tactile richness, it is the workings of Novalis's rapture that concern Fitzgerald. She draws widely from his works, letters, and diaries as well as those of his friends. Nonetheless, the mystery of how Sophie, a "decent, good-hearted Saxon girl, potato-fed" with a fondness for smoked eel, cabbage soup, and her pipe, became his guiding spirit remains. The passage in which Fritz attempts to explain to Sophie what he felt when her first saw her is typical of Fitzgerald's elusive narratives.

> When we catch sight of certain human figures and faces . . . especially certain eyes, expressions, movements—when we hear certain

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> words, when we read certain passages, thoughts take on the meaning of laws . . . a view of life true to itself, without any self-estrangement. And the self is set free, for the moment, from the constant pressure of change. . . . Do you understand me?"
>
> Sophie nodded. "Yes. I do. I have heard of that before. Some people are born again and again into this world."
>
> Fritz persevered. "I did not quite mean that. But Schlegel, too, is interested in transmigration. Should you like to be born again?"
>
> Sophie considered a little. "Yes, if I could have fair hair."

As so often in Fitzgerald's fiction, the most significant and dramatic moments of her novels are left implicit or ambivalent. Sophie's answer is at once perfectly apt and woefully inadequate. Sophie is the least interesting of all of Fitzgerald's characters. Although her stoic endurance of suffering wins the admiration not only of Fritz's father, but also that of Goethe who makes a cameo (and historically accurate) appearance, she remains a one-dimensional creation, a foil for Hardenburg's poetic ecstasies. Perhaps Sophie's superficiality is meant to convey the irrationality of the heart's affections or the ineffability of poetic inspiration, or, perhaps, it is meant to reinforce the extreme subjectivity of the romantics and their spiritual quests.

Fitzgerald swiftly wrapped up the novel, briefly noting the events of the four years between Sophie's death in 1797 and Hardenberg's in 1801. Two weeks after Sophie died, Fritz's favorite brother Erasmus also succumbed to tuberculosis. By 1800, another brother and a sister were dead. In 1798, Hardenberg had changed his name to Novalis—a clearer of new ground. Inspired by Sophie's memory, he composed the quasi-mystical, elegiac *Hymns to the Night* and continued working on *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. Novalis became engaged again a year after Sophie's death but died of tuberculosis before he could marry. Novalis's most significant contribution to German literature remains peripheral to the scope of Fitzgerald's novel. He is best known for his efforts to construct his *Totalwissenschaft*, a Coleridgean system of Universal Knowledge, in which he intended to integrate and poeticize the whole of modern science and philosophy. Only fragments remain, but these fragments have secured his literary standing.

Most of Fitzgerald's novels are enticingly and sometimes frustratingly open-ended. Thematic or tentative resolutions lend her short novels precisely the sense of endlessness that Novalis felt was essential to the transformation of life into art. Yet Fitzgerald's literary concerns transcend mere aestheticism. Central to this transformation in Fitzgerald's writing is the moral force of the imagination. For without the ability to imagine the sufferings and joys of others, how are we to find compassion for them or even resilience for ourselves? Penelope Fitzgerald expressed this in an interview with characteristic understatement:

> I have remained true to my deepest convictions, I mean to the courage of those who are born to be defeated, the weaknesses of the strong, and the tragedy of misunderstandings and missed opportunities which I have done my best to treat as comedy, for otherwise how can we manage to bear it?

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Poems
by Sarah Ruden & Richard Tillinghast

Villanelle of the hidden life

For years, I sought to walk a godly pace,
Not sensing all things rushing into God.
But now I run, I run as in a race.

There was a stream, but one I could not trace
While I was wading dust as thick as blood
And shouting that I walked a godly pace.

There was a sun, but one I did not face,
Nor see the hills pursue it in a crowd.
I did not hear it panting in its race.

But everyone who turns to seek His grace
Becomes a restless horse the faint breeze prods
And instigates beyond a godly pace.

I could not be left lonely by the chase
Toward Him. The ground was moving in a flood,
And all things sang and hurtled in the race.

And through that storm I saw how wide a space
I had to cross. I heard each slow step's thud.
For years, I sought to walk a godly pace,
But now I run, I run as in a race.

—*Sarah Ruden*

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The alley behind Ocean Drive

On beach sand two thousand footprints
Cross and overlay
And form or seem to form a pattern.
Girls speaking Italian
Take off their tops
And breathe the sun in through their pores.

The sun sets gorgeously
And then the *jeunesse dorée*, or
Eurotrash as they are called locally,
Drift back to their suites to change.
Then they emanate out onto Ocean Drive,
Sherbert-colored, to please the night air.

Behind Ocean Drive and the Colony Hotel
Runs an alley, unnamed,
Where Cuba comes to work.
When someone in the grill orders in English
The dishes get shouted
Out through the kitchen in Spanish.

People come here from far away
To spend money. Behind the Imperial,
In the alley, someone chops ice, fish are gutted,
Dirt gets washed off roots.
The ditch that runs down the
Middle of it runs red.

Out on Ocean the guy with the parrot angles for tips,
Madame Amnesia deals out a Tarot hand,
Iguana-on-a-bicycle lady wobbles
Amongst the Eurotrash. I write
My page, my way is paid.
All of us ride the swell of a tide.

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The offal, the scales, the T-bones from steaks,
The hearts and lemon rinds, are put in bags
That the city comes by and collects.
Two towels hang on a balcony overlooking the alley.
A man in a white apron
Stands outside alone and smokes.

—*Richard Tillinghast*

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Exilium

The imperial city toward which all roads tend,
Which codifies the laws and dispatches them
By runner or fax to expectant provinces
This is not. It's an improvised mélange
Mushrooming along the banks of a tidal river,
Suffering the moods of its irrational weather
And a population with much to complain about.

Though you could dignify what draws you here
By calling it exile, your solitude is your choice,
Even when it racks you, even when
Your tendons stretch with what you have to carry.
Out you go tonight making the rounds, mapping
A route through the city's drizzly melancholia,
Down streets of broad colonial emptiness.

Step inside a stained-glass door or two
Where shag and porter cloud the conversation.
Sip a slow pint in the company of strangers
While outside the rain slurs through globed lamp-glow.
The evening ages. A notebook fills with your
Idiosyncratic alphabet. Then the pubs close.

The pubs close, the streets rain-slick and desultory.
A cafeteria then—everybody's
Hangout, where plain lives put in appearances
Over tea and a bun. The cash register whirrs,
The steamy rush of the coffee machine backgrounds
A clink of ironstone plates and stainless steel.
No sigh of leisure here—every life
In the room carries the imprint of having worked
The livelong day—not to boast or prove
A point, but simply because what else is there?

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The way an old sufferer, grey hair wispy and thin,
Handles her knife, addressing a plate of fish,
Reaches you, touches some common chord.
Despite what they say about you—beyond your remoteness,
Your severe judgments on your fellow creatures—
You've some connection still to the human race.
Hypercritical, incommunicado,
It's good to know deep down you're one of us.

—*Richard Tillinghast*

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Theater

Mae days

by Mark Steyn

I've always found that a little of Mae West goes a long way, which sounds like the sort of thing she should have said about Errol Flynn. But quite a lot of Mae West is going quite a long way on the New York stage these days. It's been twenty years since her death, almost seventy since her career peaked, and, on a random sample, I find most people today have no very clear idea who she was. Yet she's out there, the phrases she planted in the language still in common currency—"Come up and see me . . . ," "A hard man is good to find," "I used to be snow white but I drifted," "Find 'em, fool 'em, forget 'em," "Peel me a grape," "Goodness had nothing to do with it," "Is that a gun in your pocket or are you just pleased to see me?" That's not a bad tally for an occasional writer. By way of comparison, Dorothy Parker may still be beloved by the dictionary of quotations compilers, but most of her lines have faded from view. They're clever—"*House Beautiful* is play lousy," etc.—but they're of limited general application and they lack the sheer human vitality of West's cracks. Some of us may still hear them in Mae's own voice, a strange cross-fertilization of Eva Tanguay and sassy black mama. But many more know them through newspaper headlines, parodies, the endless variations of TV comedy shows. (It occurs to me that anyone who doesn't know Mae West certainly won't know Eva Tanguay: she predated Mae, and was known as the "I Don't Care" girl; her signature song went: "So let down the gangway/ Here comes Eva Tanguay.") But suddenly Mae West is back and, whether or not they've a gun in their pocket, most people are just pleased to see her. Her films have been issued on video, three of her plays have been republished, one's been revived for the first time in three-quarters of a century, and the lady herself is the subject of a new biodrama at the New York Theatre Workshop.

She was, on the one hand, decades ahead of her time, and, on the other, absolutely archaic. As to the former, the revival of *Sex* (at the Gershwin Hotel) hails West as an anti-censorship crusader. For a relatively minor figure, she was at the center of celebrated cases in almost every medium. In 1939, guesting on Edgar Bergen's radio show, she told his dummy, Charlie McCarthy, "Come up and play in my woodpile," and was to all intents permanently banned from the airwaves. As a double entendre, it doesn't really work and it's certainly not the dirtiest thing you could say to a young boy entirely made of wood. But, by then, virtually any utterance by West was assumed to be a sexual innuendo, and the less obvious it seemed, the filthier it was assumed to be.

Her first films, *Night After Night* (1932), *She Done Him Wrong* (1933), and *I'm No Angel* (1933), had wider consequences. The last two made so much money and provoked such consternation that they were

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directly responsible for the restricted Production Code of 1933. That died with the studio system, but it lasted long enough to ensure that, when it finally went, the pendulum would swing long and hard. Today, the ugliness of Hollywood is a wonder to behold: in my experience, for what it's worth, the average American movie is fouler-mouthed than American life by some degree. But, every time you mention what even Democrats call the "toxic culture," Hollywood's "artistic community" indignantly accuses you of wanting to go back to the Code days when married couples could only be shown in twin beds and if the husband wanted even to wander over and chat to his wife in her bunk he had to be careful to keep one leg on the floor. There's no getting over it, it was ridiculous: you could show a double-bed in a Sears Roebuck catalogue, but not in a Warner Brothers motion picture. The conservative overreaction to Mae West gave Hollywood a grievance it still won't let us forget.

Before the films, there was *Sex*, now back on stage, though as a play within a play and somewhat subordinate to the greater drama surrounding it. In Elyse Singer's new production, both acts of the 1926 drama are bracketed with excerpts from the 1927 obscenity trial that closed the production down. In other words, as with the recent reenactment of the Oscar Wilde case, the artist is now a cause. If you're wondering why the trial didn't get going until the year after the play opened, that's because New York's Mayor, Jimmy Walker, was a great fan of Miss West. But, forty-one weeks into a sellout run, Walker happened to be out of town and the acting Hizzoner, Joseph V. McKee, decided to send in the cops. West wound up convicted of "corrupting the morals of youth" and sentenced to ten days in the Women's Workhouse on Welfare Island. "I expect it will be the making of me," she told reporters, and it was: it made her a household name. With time off for good behavior, she emerged after eight days, having written a poem about the scratchy prison underwear and dedicated it to the warden.

Mae West and her friends called their operation the Morals Production Company. Which begs the question: what moral ought we to draw from her travails? In some ways, the obscenity trial segments are the least contemporary aspect of the current production of *Sex*. They may make you pine for the racier days of Jazz Age New York, for shyster mayors and Irish cops and lippy broads, but, as an attempt to position Mae West as a prototype Karen Finley or an experimental piece of elephant dung, it's woefully unpersuasive. Only *The New York Times* could seriously think that audiences will "experience a shock of recognition" when the Giuliani of his day declares that *Sex* should be censored because it's "calculated to excite in the spectator impure imagination." The problem with enlisting *Sex* to the fecal-stained banner of the Brooklyn Museum is that it's the wrong vehicle for the message. The defining attribute of Mae West is not that she's against censorship but that, in every respect, she stands for self-reliance. She's a trouper in the truest sense: She climbed the ladder of success wrong by wrong, as she later said, but, by God, she climbed it herself. She began writing material because the lame lines the pros wrote for her vaudeville skits didn't work. She became a playwright because the star vehicle she needed never turned up. She became a producer because the Main Stem boys ran scared. If you were to construct the exact negative of today's bigtime NEA trough-feeders, it would look exactly like Mae West.

The point is reinforced by the play itself. *Sex*, the first of West's plays to make it to the stage, is a crude, raucous, vulgar melocomedy about Margy LaMont, a Montreal hooker who climbs her way up to a Connecticut mansion. As *The New Criterion*'s resident Quebecker, I confess I'm not entirely persuaded by the idea that Montreal-to-Connecticut represents upward mobility, but let that pass: all Montreal hookers (about 68 percent of the population, I'd es-

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timate) will take a quiet pride in West's characterization of Margy. For one reason, all the other characters are forgettable cutouts. But that doesn't matter because West made Margy one of those chippy, brash, tough-as-nails purpose gals whose lines crackle across the footlights. As she tells the snooty socialite Clara, "the only difference between us is that you could afford to give it away." The only contemporary relevance to all this is its irrelevance: the difference between Margy and Karen Finley is that Karen expects the taxpayer to give it away to her. Indeed, Margy shares with every Mae West character an overwhelming revulsion against dependence. A few years later, when Paramount attempted to change the title of *She Done Him Wrong* to *He Done Her Wrong*, West put her foot down, disdaining the clichés of victim drama. A few years further on, the studio tried, unsuccessfully, to get the rights to *Mrs. Warren's Profession* for West. It's hard to imagine Shaw's lines in that accent, but this time Paramount was on surer ground: evidently someone at the studio had spotted the two as soulmates. There were other "exploitation plays" around in the Twenties, but *Sex* is distinguished by Margy's uninterest in salvation. It's a rowdier, frontline confirmation of the Shavian view—that such creatures are a logical consequence of a society that makes other forms of economic independence all but impossible for women.

Still, in less brazen guise, gals like Margy were a dime a dozen on the Broadway stage in the Twenties, and it's taken the intervening seventy-five years to make a mouthy Montreal hooker seem like a breath of fresh air. In the most irritating aspect of this revival, Elyse Singer's direction, out of some strange failure of nerve, hams up the melodramatic conventions and gets the cast to deliver much of the dialogue at machine-gun pace. This not so subtle distancing from the material is unnecessary. The material is fresh; it's the contemporary point of view on it that's stale.

For all that, Miss Singer is at pains to keep Mae West at the heart of the production. George Xenos's set, for example, is an extension of Salvador Dalí's "Face Of Mae West Which Mae Be Used As An Apartment," in which West's eyes are picture frames and her lips are the sofa. In effect, both the play and the trial are being restored to their original tryout venue, inside the star's head. Yet, oddly enough, the least Westian aspect of the production is the central performance. As Margy, Carolyn Bauemler has the garb and a couple of the mannerisms (the swagger) but she looks nothing like the originator of the role. Though this revival is being mounted by the Hourglass Group, if there's an hourglass in sight it's not Miss Bauemler: blonde, young, svelte, she has the same sustaining regal dignity as West but is otherwise closer to Joan Blondell, Una Merkel, Jean Harlow, the young Ginger Rogers, and Lucille Ball, and the other gum-chewing wise-cracking Warner Bros. gold diggers who came after. But that's OK: all those ballsy blondes are descendants of Mae West, increasingly sleeker and streamlined until they all dwindle down to that faintest of xeroxed composites, Madonna.

Carolyn Bauemler's performance is enjoyable, though she could certainly afford to slow up a little. But the contrast with Margy's creator is instructive. Mae West became a twentieth-century sex symbol by remaking herself as a nineteenth-century period piece. As lushly upholstered as Lillian Russell, dripping diamonds, her fleshy curves squeezed into skintight gowns, sashaying across a Broadway stage as if it was a last-chance saloon in the Yukon, she was about as far removed as you could get from prohibition-era notions of sex—the skinny, leggy, slim-hipped, flat-chested flappers who were the Kate Mosses of the day. She was, in every sense, a throwback. She played gals called Diamond Lil and Klondike Annie; she starred in vehicles called *Belle of the Nineties*; for her forays into song, she steered clear of Rodgers and Hart, Gershwin, Berlin and stuck to oldtime warhorses like "Frankie And Johnny." The

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proposition that the sexually liberated Mae West was ahead of her time runs up against the awkward fact that she was so determinedly way behind it. Then as now, if you decline to endorse the envelope-pushing cutting edge, the usual response is that it's so radical some people are bound not to get it. But West's entire persona cocks a snook at the fake sophistication of her time and ours. To the pseuds' suggestion that some people won't get it, Mae West scoffs: Honey, we've *always* got it.

On the face of it, it's perplexing that, in the Havelockian heyday, the most enduring twentieth-century sex symbol should be a nineteenth-century sex symbol. "I did not perhaps treat the subject as seriously as Havelock Ellis, or as deeply as Freud, Adler, Jung, or Dr. Kinsey," she wrote in later life, "but I think if we all could have sat down and discussed the subject fully, my ideas would have been listened to with some sense of awe." In fact, her "ideas," such as they are, boil down to little more than a healthy skepticism of ideas. While Philip Barry and the other upscale dramatists fretted over the subtleties of Freudian subtext, Mae West simply took a relaxed attitude to reality. The black characters in her plays and films are, by the standards of the day, remarkably human. Physical abuse, prostitution, and abortion occur matter-of-factly. *Sex* is freighted with the shadow of venereal disease, which was incurable in those days but which, unlike the lethal sexual calling cards of our age, Miss West declines to make a cause for general weeping and assertions of martyrdom.

With *Sex*, it's generally agreed that the NYPD were belatedly sent in because the city feared the play West was working on as a sequel—*The Drag*, as in queen. But, even if in only vague atmospheric ways, homosexuality is often present in West's work. After *Sex* was closed down, she started writing *Diamond Lil* and *Pleasure Man*. The latter's concerns are aptly conveyed by Jack Conway's column in *Variety* after the tryout at the Bronx Opera House:

> It's the queerest show you've ever seen. All of the Queens are in it. . . . The party scene is the payoff. If you see those hussies [he continued, referring to gay actors] being introduced to do their specialties, you'd pass out. . . . The host sang a couple of parodies, one going, "When I go out I look for the moon." Now I ask you. Another guest very appropriately sang, "Banquets, Parties, and Balls," and I ask you again.

But you had to be quick to see *Pleasure Man*. On October 1, 1928, opening night on Broadway, the play was raided by the vice squad and closed down. Mae West moved on to Hollywood and became one of the biggest box-office draws in the world, but she was already pushing forty and saddled with a persona the new Production Code effectively made non grata. By the time the movie business had loosened up sufficiently to let her do her thing, the thing she wanted to do was Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckenridge*, God help us.

She came back to Broadway in 1944 with a play she'd written about Catherine the Great. Mike Todd agreed to produce it because he figured Mae West in a nympho comedy couldn't miss. At the first preview, he discovered, to his horror, that West thought she'd written a serious historical drama, and he was so embarrassed he wired his backers refunding their money on the grounds that he'd taken it under false pretences. It made no difference. Whatever her intentions, the critics took it as, in George Jean Nathan's words, "a dirty-minded little girl's essay on the Russian Empress."

Dirty Blonde (at the New York Theatre Workshop) dwells (though never too gloomily) on the star's persona as a kind of jail cell, far more confining than that on Welfare Island. It begins the story at Cypress Hills Cemetery in Brooklyn, where Mae West was laid to rest in 1980. At her idol's mausoleum, one West fan—Jo, a full-figured femme and aspiring actress played by Claudia Shear—meets another—Charlie, a film librarian and closet crossdresser played by Kevin Chamberlin. Both find

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freedom in the gowns and millinery of the 1890s, as Mae once did. As their friendship deepens, West meets West in a Mae/Mae relationship: the star was a magnificent narcissist and the notion of one Mae West making out with another Mae West would greatly appeal to her. After all, as she herself once noted, she liked to play both heroine and hero, the woman who finds her happy ending with herself.

I'm not sure how much else of *Dirty Blonde* would appeal to her, however. "Mae West was never devastated by a man," Miss Shear, the star, author and co-conceiver of *Dirty Blonde*, told *The New York Times*. "She never looked in a mirror and said, 'I'm fat.'" True, but, in putting it that way, Miss Shear is doing what Elyse Singer and the gay acolytes and everyone else does: looking for her own reflection in Mae. They're the same height—five feet—though West seems taller and Miss Shear wider: the latter once weighed over two-hundred pounds, as she told us in her autobiodrama *Blown Sideways Through Life* (1993). The passivity of that title, versus Mae West climbing her ladder "wrong by wrong," is striking. But *Dirty Blonde* is in part a meditation on the vicissitudes of celebrity: though the star is trapped by her persona, the fans are liberated by it.

If that doesn't seem much of an insight, it's apparently enough for Miss Shear. The rest of the play is selected highlights from the West oeuvre, with Miss Shear recreating the star engagingly enough and the remaining member of this three-hander, Bob Stillman, taking care of the music. The twin strands of the play show little desire to entwine, save for the fact that Chamberlin's character got to know West in later life and spent many hours contentedly sitting in her apartment watching her leaf through his souvenir scrapbooks. "She never saw Paris," says Jo, "but she could have"—one of several lines which Miss Shear seems to have positioned as a forlorn counterweight to the star's good-humoured quotable quips. The director (and co-conceiver) is James Lapine, who stages the piece with his customary stylized sterility. Even more than in the passionless *Passion* couple of years back, it seems bizarrely at odds with the subject and with the innocently abandoned approach to acting of his leading lady. You'll have a good time in the company of Shear's West, but that very fact seems to embarrass Lapine.

Dirty Blonde is set to transfer to Broadway and likely to keep this mini-West revival trundling along. Personally, I'd rather see a first-class production of *Sex* or *Diamond Lil* that imbibed the spirit of Mae West in her own time. The young pre-Vidal Mae would be amazed at the way sexual identity has become a central societal categorization, and I'd hazard a guess that she'd think it was absurd. The capering queens of *Pleasure Man* have little in common with their nominal brethren in Vermont agitating for same-sex marriage and domestic-partner benefits. It is perhaps the peculiar genius of the modern liberal establishment to have made even such exotic pleasures as male anal sex a matter of tedious government regulation and classification. Far from lighting the way to a world obsessed with the need for validation, Mae West harked back to the good old days of Victorian repression, where, if you knew what was right, you also knew, by definition, what was wrong. She celebrated illicit pleasures and, in a world where everything (at least in the sexual field) is licit, she would be lost. Her cheery leers and shoulder rolls were already archaic in the faux decadence of the Twenties, and, in the moral blankness of our own time, they're even more so.

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Music

A treasure trove of conducting

by Lawrence A. Johnson

In an era when America's television networks have graced the nation's airwaves with artistic gems featuring the likes of Jerry Springer and Ricki Lake—Oprah Winfrey having somehow been transformed from an annoying, chatty presenter of similar psychosocial trainwrecks into her new roles as national spiritual healer and (too scary to contemplate) literary arbiter—it's hard to believe that there was a time in this country when American broadcasters felt an obligation to present classical music to the public. It's even harder to remember that symphony orchestra concerts were a regular feature of the early days of television. NBC, for example, not only presented classical music but also founded its own orchestra, hiring the most celebrated conductor of the day, Arturo Toscanini, to lead it. Can one imagine any television network today—even PBS—building an orchestra and hiring Riccardo Chailly or Bernard Haitink to make recordings and lead televised concerts? The implausibility of that prospect shows how far and quickly we have descended down the path of cultural mediocrity and worse with the happy aid of the irresponsible, profit-driven Philistines who populate network programming suites.

While many recordings from the discographic legacy of Toscanini and the NBC Symphony Orchestra still remain touchstones today, the Italian conductor's hard-driving, often relentless approach has worn less well than that of Fritz Reiner. The career of the Hungarian-born conductor, underrated by the public and critics alike during his lifetime, suffered from Toscanini's flashier, more marketing-friendly persona. Reiner's career was not helped by his despotic nature and cruelty to orchestra musicians. Setting the tone for his Chicago tenure from the start, Reiner fired a violinist at his very first rehearsal as music director. "Get off this stage," he said. "I don't accept playing like that in my orchestra."

Despite his dictatorial style, Reiner's uncanny ear for blending refinement and color with scrupulous textural balancing made his years as music director from 1953 to 1962 a golden era for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Reiner's RCA Victor discography, while less extensive than Toscanini's, has better stood the test of time. While recordings have shown the extent of Reiner's achievement in Chicago, video records of his concerts in the late 1950s and early 1960s have only recently been released by Video Artists International (VAI).[1]

From 1951 (two years before Reiner's arrival) to 1963, the CSO was seen in regular television broadcasts, offering an abbreviated program from that week's subscription concerts. The first concert was broad-

1 The first six volumes are now available for $24.95 each. Each video contains a single show, which minus commercials runs from 43 to 56 minutes. They can be bought directly from VAI at (914) 769-3691 or via their website at www.vaimusic.com.

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cast on September 25, 1951 from the Civic Theater, with the then music director Rafael Kubelik conducting. Fed to twenty-two fledgling stations, this program inaugurated the first regular weekly televised symphony concerts in the country. Since the initial contract specified only twenty-five musicians, the CSO was billed as the Chicago Symphony Chamber Orchestra.

By 1953, when Reiner became the orchestra's music director, WGN was producing the show, and it had been expanded to an hour. The "Hour of Music" aired at four o'clock Sunday afternoons, and was syndicated over the fourteen-station DuMont network. Reiner and his assistant conductor George Schick conducted half the programs that season, with the rest led by a remarkable lineup of guest conductors including Igor Stravinsky, Karl Böhm, Bruno Walter, Carlo Maria Giulini, Antal Dorati, Ernest Ansermet, William Steinberg, and Erich Leinsdorf. The first surviving films hail from that period, since DuMont made kinescopes to distribute to its member stations. Though the series continued on WGN through 1958, the weekly shows were gradually reduced to one a month and after 1955 syndication stopped entirely.

After a year off the air, the show returned as "Great Music from Chicago," and aired live on Sunday evenings. Now using as many as seventy musicians for each broadcast, the programs offered roughly half of that week's CSO subscription repertoire, though more "popular" shorter works were often substituted. The programs were usually taped at WGN's Studio 1-A in the Tribune Tower, which had a capacity of four-hundred people. Broadcasts were also made from Orchestra Hall, the Ravinia Festival, and the ballroom of the Edgewater Beach Hotel. "Great Music from Chicago" ran for four seasons from 1959 to 1963.

Amazingly, eighty of the 104 shows produced by WGN have been located. The Chicago Symphony, WGN, and VAI all deserve enthusiastic kudos for straightening out all the legal hassles to bring us these long-withheld broadcasts. Indeed, as the first six releases show, this is a real treasure trove of great musical and historical importance. These videos bring us one of the world's great orchestras playing at its peak and led by some of the greatest conductors of the twentieth century.

General audiences may find the videos visually dull: the drabness of the formal wear and somber gray hues of the studio setting is magnified by the early black and white images. Because of the minimal camera set-up, there are some odd glitches—blurred panning and the like—but much of the direction is surprisingly deft and artfully highlights the orchestral players. VAI has done a terrific job of remastering the sound and tempering the studio-bound dryness to find surprising body and amplitude; the music at time fairly leaps out of the speakers with immediacy and brilliance.

The first volume—and, so far, the only one featuring Reiner—is the oldest, dating from 1954. For those who know and love Reiner's recordings but are too young to have seen him conduct, viewing this tape is a fascinating experience. Forsaking tails for a dark business suit with a pocket handkerchief, Reiner strides purposefully to the podium, leading off with a dynamic performance of Beethoven's Symphony No. 7.

A stolid figure with an intense gaze, Reiner in the first movement is almost completely immobile except for his baton-holding right hand. At times, it's difficult to reconcile the exuberant orchestral playing with Reiner's dour visage, though he becomes more animated as the music continues, arching a brow for pianissimos. He maintains notable tension during the Allegretto movement, highlighting subsidiary lines. While the Presto third movement moves along with vitality and drive, Reiner seems almost to be dozing, his eyes nearly shut until he opens them wide to lead a vigorous reprise of the opening music at the end of the trio. Throughout the symphony, the remarkable precision and strength that characterized Reiner's best performances are heard, and the final movement is exciting

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and dynamic without sacrificing textural clarity.

Interestingly, the oft-mentioned anecdotes about Reiner's microbial vest-pocket beat don't really jibe with the conducting glimpsed here. While there are no Bernsteinian calisthenics, Reiner often uses his long baton in grand sweeping gestures, and is even somewhat flamboyant in the fast passages. Reiner is revealed as something of a showman; conscious of the audience, he quickly takes out his handkerchief and wipes his face a few bars before the coda. After this exhilarating performance, he even manages a small smile for the orchestra before stepping off the podium.

In the custom of the day, Reiner follows the longest work with two shorter items. Baroque music was a relative rarity on Reiner's concert programs, and his sprightly performance of the Queen of Sheba's Arrival from Handel's *Solomon* is finely pointed with nimble playing by the two oboes. This stylish performance makes one regret the lack of Baroque music in Reiner's discography. Despite a clipped first note—was part of the video chopped?—Reiner finishes with a darkly dramatic *Egmont Overture*.

The second volume offers a December 17, 1961 broadcast with George Szell leading the orchestra. The program opens with the prelude to Mussorgsky's *Khovanshchina* in the Rimsky-Korsakov orchestration. Ray Still, the principal oboe, leads off with a beautifully plangent solo, equaled by subsequent clarinet and flute playing by Jerome Stowell and Donald Peck. In Beethoven's Symphony No. 5, Szell's short, precise beat elicits a trim, athletic reading: taut and dramatic. The Andante is well played, but feels too controlled, lacking something in warmth and spontaneity. There is some surprisingly grim double-bass playing at the start of the Scherzo—one can only imagine the look Reiner would have shot the musicians' way. Alert and watchful, Szell fluidly moves from expectant mystery at the end of the Scherzo to the blazing opening of the finale. More energized and less controlled, this is the best part of the performance, boosted by Still's wonderfully singing oboe in the restatement of the Scherzo, even if there is a whiff of pedantry to Szell's handling of the closing bars.

Just seventeen days later (January 3, 1962), Leopold Stokowski, a conductor who enjoyed a relationship with the CSO in the extended Indian summer of his career, led the broadcast heard in VAI's third volume. For all the audacity of his orchestrations and his wild-man reputation, Stokowski is a serious and controlled figure on the podium, directing sans baton, using both hands for expressive yet economical gestures. In the old wizard's celebrated arrangement of Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D minor, the studio-bound CSO can't quite summon up the lush, French-organ sonority of the old Philadelphians. Donald Peck contributes a nimble flute solo, but there is some pretty scrappy playing from the strings at the start of the fugue, with distinct rumblings of the orchestra's post-Reiner mid-1960s slide also apparent in some of the string playing and wind tuning.

There can be no complaints about Stokowski's account of Brahms's *Variations on a Theme of Haydn*, which offers one of the most outstanding performances of the entire series. Again, there is some rough-edged violin intonation, but the introduction of the theme offers notably refined wind playing. Flowing and warmly expressive, the conductor characterizes each variation individually yet keeps firmly within the theme's (not really by Haydn, but never mind) classical boundaries. The quick variation for brass is tensile and rhythmically propulsive and the ensuing grazioso could not be more affectionately done. An exuberantly controlled finale puts the seal on a gracious and civilized performance.

The concluding work, Rimsky-Korsakov's *Capriccio Espagnol*, was once an oft-played showpiece but has fallen into the disrepute of most colorful orchestral works (save for the same composer's *Scheherazade*). Stokowski's opening is electrifying, followed by delightful solo clarinet work from Clark

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Brody. Here the strings are more secure and richly sonorous, bringing the brilliance of Iberian sunshine to the main Spanish theme. While it's not a great work, Stokowski's exhilarating performance makes it seem like one. This is one of the most worthy volumes in the series.

The fourth volume jumps back almost exactly a year, with Pierre Monteux leading the orchestra on New Year's Day, 1961. Just six days later, Monteux would make his legendary recording of the Franck Symphony in D minor with the CSO (sadly, his only commercial recording with the orchestra). Using an imposing Nikisch-sized baton, which looks more suitable for pole vaulting, the portly, distinguished-looking French conductor leads a delightfully youthful and spirited performance of Beethoven's Symphony No. 8. With violins split left and right, the recapitulation has a neat, concentrated tension at the climax of the development. The trio of the Scherzo enjoys fleet horn playing and more superb contributions from clarinetist Brody. The Allegro vivace is astringently vibrant, Monteux using minimal gestures to indicate the dynamic marking and obtaining wonderful clarity to the orchestral sound.

A solemn reading of Wagner's prelude to Act III of *Der Meistersinger* is brooding, darkly eloquent, and beautifully played by the orchestra. While still transfixed by the burnished darkness of the Wagner, we hear the brassy opening bars of Berlioz's *Roman Carnival Overture* break in upon us rather jarringly. This is a dashing yet elegant performance lacking nothing in excitement, the textures never coarse or overbearing. A touching moment occurs at the end when the concertmaster Sidney Harth, after shaking hands with Monteux, gently holds the hand of the eighty-nine-year-old conductor as he steps off the podium.

The final two volumes are in some ways the most visually interesting, since they were recorded at live concerts at the CSO's home in Orchestra Hall. That meant that the orchestra was not limited to the chamber dimensions dictated by the studio venue. The fifth volume (February 27, 1963) features the Alsatian conductor Charles Munch in an all-French program offering the most adventurous program of the videos so far released.

The concert opens with a real rarity, Vincent D'Indy's arrangement of a suite from Rameau's *Dardanus*. D'Indy's well-tempered romanticizing of Rameau's dances would not withstand the musicologically correct scrutiny of today's Baroque specialists, but this is a greatly enjoyable confection, given a refined performance. The burnished playing and gleaming sonority in the introduction to the "Royal Hunt and Storm" from Berlioz's *Les Troyens* sounds uncannily like Munch's Boston Symphony Orchestra. The storm section is lacking a little in drive and excitement, perhaps partly due to the somewhat woolly balancing of the orchestra, which, oddly, sounds less focused at home in their concert hall than they did in the studio.

Munch ends the concert with a pairing of Ravel's *Valses nobles et sentimentales* and *La Valse*. The conductor elicits wonderful languor in the first work, nicely bringing out the sense of elegant unease underlying this superficial dance rhythms. Munch's beatific smiling, coaxing, eyes-closed figure is so reminiscent of Leonard Bernstein in its sweaty intensity that one can only wonder if the Boston native consciously modeled his extravagant podium demeanor in part on his Alsatian colleague. *La Valse* receives a magnificently sonorous reading, with terrific playing by the orchestra in all departments. The pause between the two Ravel works is so brief as to be almost imperceptible—perhaps to fit both works into the hourlong broadcast—but the complementary musical qualities of the works are underlined that much more firmly.

The final video of this first batch of releases is perhaps the most historically significant, offering Paul Hindemith conducting his own music, Bruckner, and Brahms. Hindemith proved to be the most interesting of all the conductors to watch. Using a

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very short baton, he conducts with great flamboyance and intensity. Hindemith's performance of his *Concert Music for Strings and Brass* is boldly projected, incisive, and well-played. There is a certain raw toughness to the playing that fits Hindemith's angular music, worlds removed from the gleaming sonority that Munch elicited just a few weeks earlier. How deftly Hindemith stresses the chromatic brass writing against the string cantilena at the end of the first movement. The brusque forthrightness of Hindemith's conducting suits his music, leading to a sonorous conclusion.

In a brief intermission interview of the conductor by Seymour Raven, the CSO's general manager, Hindemith talks more about Bruckner's music than his own. Hindemith maintains that Bruckner is (or was) somewhat misunderstood: that the "solemnity" of Bruckner's music was exaggerated and that there was much more variety and richness in the Austrian composer's music. Hindemith puts his baton where his mouth is with an incredible performance of the first movement of Bruckner's Symphony No. 7. That Hindemith was a fine conductor is well known, but this performance is a real revelation. He brings out a vitality and a rich-toned clarity to the performance that contrasts markedly with the stodgy heaviness of so many latter-day Brucknerians at Orchestra Hall. Hindemith elicits a pastoral naïveté in this music, and his fluid, forward moving pulse beautifully paces the vast structure. It's regrettable that the hourlong program only allowed the first movement to be telecast (the complete symphony was played at the week's CSO concerts).

Hindemith is just as impressive in the closer, Brahms's *Academic Festival Overture*. As with Reiner, it's hard to connect the somewhat dour, unprepossessing figure on the podium with the wonderfully vital and vibrant performance of Brahms's joyful overture. Indeed, this is one of the most exhilarating performances of the overture I have ever heard. Demonstrating what a fine conductor Hindemith was is a good way to round things off.

VAI deserves our thanks both for reviving these historically significant broadcasts and for doing it with such technical mastery and artistic skill. Despite the explosion of cable channels and alternative media in recent decades, the commitment to televised arts and serious music on the airwaves is a minute fraction of what it was at the dawn of television. Not only do these videos capture a glorious period in one of the world's great orchestras at the middle of the twentieth century, they also preserve a refreshing snapshot of a more enlightened era, one in which the nation's television broadcasters felt a strong commitment to contributing to the cultural good of American society rather than laying waste to it.

Concert note

Thomas Hampson
at Segerstrom Hall, Costa Mesa, California.

What a puzzlement Thomas Hampson is. This American baritone, who will turn forty-five in June, is at once a prodigiously gifted singer and an infuriatingly pompous, aloof artist. On the operatic stage, his excesses might be deemed virtues, along with his strapping, bluff physiognomy, but on the recital platform his hectoring delivery, stiff gestures, and occasionally rough timbre invite less compassion. (The baritone's thrashing of Schubert's *Winterreise* a couple of years ago still troubles the memory.) And yet Hampson can just as easily remind us why he is so acclaimed: his crisp diction, rich tone, and interpretive sensitivity rival any singer concertizing today. So what's a song lover to do when Hampson once more alternates between Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in the concert hall?

Suffer and smile, one supposes, for Hampson provoked both pain and pleasure at Segerstrom Hall on January 25, when he and the pianist Craig Rutenberg interrupted an all-Mahler tour to give an Orange County audience a more digestible program of songs by Schubert, Samuel Barber, sev-

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eral lesser known American composers, and, yes, some Mahler. The program opened with six songs from Schubert's *Schwanengesang*, and from the get-go Hampson postured, showing off his big sound and crushing the music in the process. Convinced that subtlety was of no importance, he restricted his dynamic range to mezzo forte and louder. And even when he attempted feeling, in "Ihr Bild," for example, he sounded arch. He shamelessly milked the open vowels of "An Meer" and made faces when singing "Das Fischermädchen." More than anything, this sad outing reminded one of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau in decline, when the once great singer would bark rather than emote or interpret.

One feared for the next item on the program, Mahler's *Songs of a Wayfarer*. But, late in the day, Hampson realized that when he had last come to Orange County, he had sung the very same songs (albeit with orchestra), and so he decided to replace this meaty short cycle with three items from the less weighty *Das Knaben Wunderhorn* and one from *Lieder und Gësange aus der Jugendzeit*. Hampson was in his element in these peculiar, martial pieces. In "Aus, Aus," "Der Schildwache Nachtlied," "Revelge," and "Zu Strassbourg auf der Schanz," the baritone beautifully blended color and power. Lovely touches graced each song, creating an admixture in which the force of Hampson's outsized personality helped bring over the material. Even his stentorian leanings served him well.

And the situation only improved after the intermission, when Hampson tackled a half-dozen songs by Barber. Here was something to throw in the faces of the baritone's detractors. In these tender items, set to poems by Housman, Joyce, and others, Hampson revealed that there is a flipside to his temperament, that he can indeed bring something to music's more delicate strains. In "The Daisies," a certain sunny quality brightened his delivery, whereas "With Rue My Heart Is Laden" gained from his earnestness. "Solitary Hotel," to Joyce's spare text, was veritable sprechstimme as Hampson communicated it. In all six items, his enunciation was letter-perfect, his interpretations evocative and heartfelt.

Hampson proved no less fine in Edward MacDowell's "The Sea," William Grant Still's "Grief," John Jacob Niles's "Black is the Color of My True Love's Hair," and Clifford Shaw's "The Nightingale." All benefited from Hampson's superb word painting and his big, burnished sound. But when it came to two more familiar works—"Shenandoah" and Aaron Copland's "The Boatmen's Dance"—Hampson allowed his worst instincts to resurface. Contorting his face and singing with unfounded self-importance, he even raised a hand and clutched the air at one point. The effect was all the more damaging given the touching mood he wrecked.

Yet once more Hampson regained his composure, delivering as an encore a simple version of Copland's "Long Time Ago" (taken, like "The Boatmen's Dance," from the first set of *Old American Songs*). He followed it with Haydn Wood's "Roses of Picardy," that perennial tearjerker, which Hampson managed with plenty of sentiment but not a trace of sentimentality.

Rutenberg emerged as a sturdy rather than inspired accompanist. But he never let Hampson down, save perhaps when the baritone was speeding through the high-spirited "Boatmen's Dance." More frequently, Rutenberg attempted to help ground the showboating singer. At times, the two formed a perfect union, as in "Solitary Hotel," when the interplay between pianist and singer left one deeply moved.

It's hard to imagine that Hampson is unaware of his excesses. More likely, he revels in them. But until he puts such juvenile shenanigans behind him, he won't really evolve into the singer one assumes he desperately wants to be. The talent is there. If only the spirit were willing.

—David Mermelstein

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The media

"The candor pander"

by James Bowman

The most revealing and in some ways the most poignant moment to come out of the series of "debates" among the presidential candidates that took place in November, December, and January, before the voting actually started, came during the Republican affair—with the best will in the world it cannot be called a debate in any recognizable sense of the term—in Manchester, New Hampshire on December 2. This was the occasion on which Gary Bauer, reaching for something vaguely inspirational to say, sought to encourage the allegedly "cynical" youth of America by noting as evidence for the greatness of their country the fact that he, G. Bauer, the son of a janitor, could have risen so high as to be numbered among the last six candidates for the Republican nomination to the presidency.

Now I happen to agree with Gary Bauer about many, if not most things, but in this answer he summed up the postmodern politics of the Clinton era—politics, that is, as a subcategory of celebrity worship. Like those of Alan Keyes and Steve Forbes, two others who presented themselves to primary voters without ever having managed to get themselves elected to anything, let alone to the sort of office that might plausibly be considered a springboard to the presidency, and like that of Orrin Hatch, whose electability to anything outside of Utah is almost equally doubtful, Bauer's was essentially a vanity candidacy. In a way, its entire *raison d'être* was fulfilled that night in Manchester when he modestly allowed himself just a moment for preening about being one of "the last six" Republicans contending for the nomination. At least his mailing list had enabled him to outlast those electoral giants Dan Quayle, Liddy Dole, Pat Buchanan, Lamar Alexander, and Senator Bob Smith.

What kind of achievement is that for a man to be proud of—let alone to appeal to the appreciation of voters on the basis of? Bauer may have had an agenda to be acted upon in the ridiculously unlikely event of his becoming president, but anyone so self-deluded as to have persisted in such a hopeless candidacy as his cannot be thinking first of his agenda. How is the pro-life or pro-family cause helped by its principal advocate's being seen as a laughingstock? On the contrary, if he had been serious in it, his very persistence with such a candidacy was itself *prima facie* evidence that he was unfit for the office he sought. Would you want the finger on The Button to belong to someone with no firmer grip on reality than to fancy Gary Bauer's—or Orrin Hatch's or Steve Forbes's or Alan Keyes's—chances to be elected president?

In the event, Bauer never even approached the stratospheric heights in the polls of Keyes or Forbes, who at their best soared into the low teens. In the actual New Hampshire primary, two strenuous months of campaigning later, Bauer got 1 percent of the vote and promptly, though not before

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time, dropped out of the race. That outcome was not just foreseeable, it was practically inevitable. But suppose that a miracle had happened. Suppose that Bauer's charisma and rhetorical forcefulness had indeed produced the Bauer breakthrough that his paid campaign staff doubtless assured him was imminent. Suppose he had swept the Republican field and gone on to nomination by acclamation in Philadelphia next summer. Is it possible that even Gary Bauer, in his wildest imaginings, ever thought that he could then go on to be elected president of a country that twice elected Bill Clinton?

Let us give him credit for some remaining tethers to reality and assume not. Are we then to suppose that he went into the presidential contest as the noble representative of a lost cause? If so, it must have been rather in the spirit of Peter Cook's air marshal in the Battle of Britain sketch of the original *Beyond the Fringe* when he proposes a suicide mission: "Go up. Take a shufti. Don't come back. We need a futile gesture at this point." But I don't think it is that. Bauer has lost nothing by his candidacy and he has gained some publicity, which, along with the money it brings, is what he has spent his life trying to get for his advocacy group. The real purpose of his candidacy was just the boost it gave his résumé and hence his ability to raise money. As even so minor a celebrity as "one of the last six Republicans in the race," he is better off than he was when he was no more than the author of those signatures on the Family Research Council's fund-raising letters.

Of course, the good people of the news media never resent those who use them in this way—even when the users are conservative Republicans. The relation between celebrity and celebrity-maker is too delicately symbiotic to allow of any moral indignation about ends and means on either side. But to the rest of us it must seem that Bauer's presence in the debates was like that of an autograph hunter at a *Star Trek* convention. "I was there," he could boast. "I, too, stood for a moment in the company of the immortals." If such apparent lowness and littleness of spirit still seems to you to be a disqualification for the presidency, you have not yet absorbed the lessons of Clintonism. Bauer may be a pipsqueak celebrity-seeker, but this, like Bill Clinton's libido, only brings him closer to those whom he would represent. All of us are celebrity-seekers now. Thus Bauer's pride in his mere presence among the candidates became, paradoxically, the *sine qua non* of a real candidate, namely the mark of personal authenticity.

For what else were the real candidates fighting over but the same claim to authenticity? Whether it was disguised as a question of "character" or "leadership" or an animadversion on "negative campaigning," the only real matter before the public in 2000 has been that of who is the better, more sincere, more genuine, more honest, more noble, more brave, more straightforward, more innocent, more sensitive, more feelingly compassionate human being. George W. Bush, when asked by Tim Russert on "Meet the Press" about why he should be president, answered: "First, I received unconditional love from my parents." And then, he added, "being Governor of Texas helped a lot." Also, "I was an entrepreneur." And by the way, his wife is "a classy lady" and "I love her dearly."

Now there are some qualifications for you! Number one on the list is the love of his parents—whose love, nevertheless, would hardly have been a matter of public interest if they had not been George and Barbara Bush. Numbers two and three are his "being" governor and entrepreneur. Actually *doing* anything in either capacity is presumably a secondary consideration. It is enough that these are items on the résumé. At least, unlike Gary Bauer, he doesn't cite his candidacy itself as an accomplishment. And qualification number four is loving his wife—unlike, he forbore to add, certain nameless persons about whom there may be some doubt on the score of their seemly uxoriousness.

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The younger Bush seems to have learned from his father's vanquisher that postmodern politics consists of little or nothing beyond making the louder and more insistent claims to those creditable feelings and attitudes that, focus groups tell him, most people are prepared to take as signs of likability and genuineness. Hence his early attempt at a Republican version of Clintonian "triangulation" when, as the champion of "compassionate conservatism," he charged his fellow Republicans in Congress not to "balance the budget on the backs of the poor." Naturally, the media praised the political genius of such a move to capture the vital center—not only because he made news by breaking with his fellow Republicans but also because the Republican Congress is assumed to be to everyone else what it is to the media: *so* yesterday's story!

But Bush was not such a genius as to realize that he was in a fight with a real master triangulator in John McCain. I confess to a certain amount of *Schadenfreude* when McCain's line in phoniness and cant about the "special interests" (as if all interests were not special) or "tax cuts that disproportionately benefit the wealthy" (who should benefit most but those who pay most?) soundly trounced Bush's in New Hampshire. That'll teach him, I thought, though it won't. For whoever wins the Republican nomination will have to triangulate and cant away for all he's worth, and it is McCain, with his "Straight Talk Express," who has already cornered the market in cant about being cant-free. In these heartless times, the competing cant of the famously "compassionate" Mr. Bush, who joked about ignoring the pleas for mercy of the born-again murderess Karla Fay Tucker, seems a back number by comparison.

He can always vie for the title of "maverick" or "outsider" in Washington. "I'm the *real* outsider," says George; "No, *I* am," says John. But John knows that he's on to a good thing. The man whose political reputation is associated with his intercession with banking regulators on behalf of the savings-and-loan crook and campaign contributor Charles Keating, his subsequent campaign for the media's favorite cause, campaign-finance reform, and his contribution to the demonization of the tobacco industry had had the wit to see the unique advantages of his position for being first on the Republican side, as Bill Bradley was first on the Democratic side, with what Howard Kurtz of *The Washington Post* has identified as "the candor pander."

> Journalists have heaped praise on these two men for their seeming abandonment of artifice. But perhaps we are just being manipulated by what one strategist calls "the candor pander." . . . In the endless search for the "real" story, reporters are drawn—at least initially—to those who give the best impersonation of being real. And there's a normal human reaction: We like people who seem to like us.
>
> Political operatives, interestingly enough, tend to be skeptical of too much reality. Paul Begala, a former aide to President Clinton, bristles at what he calls "running around and advertising your virtues as a truth teller. The candor panderers talk about talking straight more than they simply talk straight. The press goes gaga for it, but voters don't care."
>
> Perhaps it's telling that those who have coached the office seekers see spontaneity as just another tactic. "Authenticity is often deeply phony," says Bill Kristol, the *Weekly Standard* editor and former GOP strategist. "The focus on authenticity follows from the focus on feelings. Clinton set a new standard when he said 'I feel your pain.' The next question for a candidate is, does he authentically feel those feelings—or is it a sham?"

But the real advantage to the Clintonian candidate of the shift in public discourse from the question of what he means to do to that of whether or not he genuinely feels is that the answer to the latter question, even supposing that one were discoverable, becomes almost irrelevant. During the cut and thrust of a political campaign, claims to having the right feelings and attitudes have to be taken in lieu of the same feelings and

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attitudes, since the depth of inquiry necessary to prove them is not practicable. And the war hero McCain and the ex-basketball star Bradley are already well-supplied with badges of authenticity that shine the brighter for being beyond all question *authentic* authenticity.

Thus it is that the media would not allow any discussion of "the issues" even if there were any issues. And, of course, there are none. How could there be when the electorate is fat and happy and at peace? All the Republicans save McCain tried to drum up some enthusiasm for tax reductions or reform of the tax code, but hardly anyone cared. Even among the Democrats, who are more used to "issues" than Republicans, Bill Bradley's attempt to make health care finance reform a matter of public interest and enthusiasm struck few sparks. Vice President Gore characteristically seized Bradley's proposal as an opportunity for his own form of canting about how Bradley intended to "end" Medicaid and "endanger" Medicare. Bradley then downplayed health care and instead picked a fight with Gore over some doubts the latter had once had in the distant past as to whether or not abortion was always and everywhere the wonderful thing that all true Democrats apparently believe it to be.

Tellingly, it was this attack and nothing to do with the health-care plan (or anything else substantive) which the media praised as revealing a new determination and toughness in the hitherto meek and "wonkish" Bradley campaign. At last the Democrats' champion of candor was hitting back with the tactics of Gore himself, who had attacked Bradley for once having flirted with the idea of educational vouchers—and these are as hateful to an important Democratic constituency (the teachers' unions) as abortion-on-demand is lovable to another (the feminists). Gore vehemently but falsely denied that he had ever had such doubts about abortion and only just stopped short of demonstrating his feminist bona fides by proposing universal compulsory infanticide.

Such poverty of discourse in the debate of both parties is a national scandal. Partly it is a result of the professionalization of political campaigning and its having been turned over to the pollsters and speechwriters and spin experts. But mostly it is a result of the media's abdication of their job, which is to insist that those who avail themselves of their conduit to the public should have something substantive to say. Instead, the media are like Gary Bauer, so overawed by the celebrity presences of the politicians they court, and so credulous of the cant themselves, that they allow them to get away with the most appalling breaches of taste, coherence, and logic. The necessity imposed upon reporters by the myth of journalistic "objectivity" to remain disengaged from the battle they report allows them only to make judgments about the *processes* and not the substance of electioneering—and to wring their hands and shake their heads and cluck their tongues about "negative campaigning" every time what they themselves reckon to be a forceful blow is struck.

Naturally, the politicians take up the journalists' obsession with process, and charges against each other of negative campaigning themselves become the principal forms of negative campaigning. Thus, a week or so before the primary, there was a two- or three-day flurry of interest in the charge by a woman in South Carolina that the Bush campaign was engaged in "push polling." This consists in telephoning the supporters of your rival and asking them, under the guise of seeking their opinion, if they know that their man is widely known to be a liar, a thief, and a child-molester. The woman's fourteen-year-old son, to whom Senator McCain was a hero and a role model, received such a call from persons unknown and, like any other would-be fighter pilot, went running to his mother. She said:

> But he was so upset when he came upstairs and he said "Mom, someone told me that Senator McCain is a cheat and a liar and a

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fraud." And he was almost in tears. I'm so mad, I was so livid last night I couldn't sleep.

"The Republican presidential campaign has just got a lot nastier," said Dan Rather, solemnly. NBC's reporter saw the charge, which the Bush camp denied, as "one more sign that this Republican race is getting uglier than anyone imagined." McCain, more in sorrow than in anger, was quoted as saying: "I'm calling on my good friend George Bush to stop this now. He comes from a better family, he knows better than this, and he should stop it. I'll pull down every negative ad I have. Let's treat the voters of South Carolina with some respect." Score another one for McCain. Not only did he get the benefit of his negative ads (in which—how low can you get?—he had compared his opponent's way with the truth to Bill Clinton's), but he then got the credit for pulling them. In the same way, in one of the New Hampshire debates, Bill Bradley accused Al Gore of having "gone negative"—a charge which Gore then proceeded to describe as a "negative attack" on his, Gore's, integrity.

Interestingly, among the examples of the Bush campaign's alleged dirty tricks were the following push-poll questions: "Do you know the McCain tax plan does not give a significant tax cut to average working families?" and "Do you agree with McCain's plan to give more power to the media and unions to pick the president?" The first of these seems no more than a simple statement of the fact and the second is at least an arguable interpretation of the effects of the McCain-Feingold Campaign Finance bill. But the extent to which the media already have the power to pick the president was beginning to be apparent just from its obsession with this controversy and others of similarly trivial import which, their marketing people must be telling them, are of more interest to readers and viewers than boring health care or tax proposals.

For it was pretty obvious that the media were scarcely interested in the substance of the alleged charges against McCain—only in whether or not they emanated from someone in the Bush camp and, if so, what that might tell us about whether or not Governor Bush is *nice* enough to be president. For niceness is really what the authenticity question boils down to. The successful candidate will be pretty tough in fighting back against his opponent's charges that he is not nice enough, but not so tough as to appear "mean" or "mean-spirited" and, well, not nice enough. It is a delicate balance for a candidate to have to strike, but we have to set the bar pretty high, after all, in choosing the leader of the world's only remaining superpower.

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Books

Father knows best

by Joseph Epstein

Despite the implications of the marital misadventures of a certain gentleman from Thebes, a fellow who wed with all too little forethought, there is not much evidence that a mother exerts a more telling influence over a son than a father. Just as often—I would guess more often—the father is the more significant figure, for good and ill. Having a father who is benevolent or unjust, honorable or corrupt, cheerful or grim, a success or a failure in life, can, along with so many other things, weigh in heavily on the outlook, the ambition, the confidence, and the ultimate fate of a son. The kind of father one gets, of course, comes under that large and scientifically untrackable category known as the luck of the draw.

V. S. Naipaul, in this regard, drew very luckily indeed. His father, Seepersad Naipaul (1906–53), a man of the most modest worldly success, was entirely honorable, generous, selfless, and filled with good sense, for his son if not always for himself. No man ever had anyone more devoted in his corner than Naipaul had in the man he called Pa. When his father died, at the age of forty-seven, V. S. Naipaul, himself only twenty-one, sent home a telegram that, in part, read: "He was the best man I knew. Everything I owe to him." Allow here for the exaggeration that accompanies grief, but no need to allow much. Later he added: "In a way I had always looked upon my life as a continuation of his—a continuation which, I hoped, would be a fulfillment."

Until now our picture of Seepersad Naipaul derived largely from the eponymous figure from his son's novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Comparing his father to the father who is the protagonist of his novel, Naipaul has recently said: "My father was a profounder man in every way. And his wounds are deeper than the other man can say. [My novel is] based on him, but it couldn't be the real man." Affecting as the Mr. Biswas of the novel is—I happen to think him one of a small number of memorable comic characters in contemporary literature—Seepersad Naipaul turns out to have been kinder, gentler, more deeply touching than his portrait in fiction.

In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Anand, the oldest son and easily most favored child in a crowded household, sails off from Port of Prince for England; a boyhood dominated by school examinations has paid off in a scholarship to Oxford, to which he is now headed. "He missed Anand," Naipaul writes of Mr. Biswas, "and worried about him."

> Anand's letters, at first rare, become more and more frequent. They were gloomy, self-pitying; then they were tinged with a hysteria which Mr. Biswas immediately understood. He wrote Anand long humorous letters; he wrote about the garden; he gave religious advice; at great expense he sent by air mail a book called *Outwitting Our Nerves* by two American psychologists. Anand's letters grew

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rare again. There was nothing Mr. Biswas could do but wait.

This passage, coming toward the close of Naipaul's novel, is a less than adequate summary of the correspondence between Naipaul *père et fils*. The character of the correspondence, now printed in *Between Father and Son*[1] (which also includes a number of letters between the young V. S. Naipaul and his older sister Kamla, and occasional letters to other family members) is better captured in another passage in the novel, where Naipaul writes: "And now Mr. Biswas needed his son's interest and anger. In all the world there was no one else to whom he could complain." In fact, in real life, there was an extraordinary reciprocity between the two, father and son, who at different times complained to, bucked up, and relied upon each other.

The letters in *Between Father and Son* commence in earnest in August of 1950, when the eighteen-year-old V. S. Naipaul writes a letter to his younger sister Sati from New York, a brief stopover on his way to London and thence to Oxford, to take up his scholarship. He will be gone for six years, not once returning in the interval and never again to see the father who will suffer a heart attack in February 1953, which leaves him with a greatly weakened heart that will extinguish him by October of the same year.

Not long after his heart attack, his father writes to Naipaul, "Please take good care of yourself; for should anything untoward happen to you, 'the last hope of England' will have vanished." The joke here is that the last hope of English literature is meant, but behind this small jest Naipaul's father really meant that his own last hope will have vanished. V. S. Naipaul—Vido, as his family called him—was the family hope. Quick, disciplined, moody, good at school (with a "precociousness that marked you out from all the others [of my children]," as his father writes), Vido was his father's and the family's hope to leave some mark on the larger world.

As Naipaul would later—and quite accurately—write: Mr. Biswas's "visions of the future became only visions of Anand's future." The hope was to break free of decades and decades of the deep obscurity in a country, Trinidad, that was the two stages beyond provincial. Ill, doing work that was beneath him, with every kind of cheeseparing money worry imaginable, Naipaul's father nevertheless writes to him in England that "the truth is the only person I am often worried about is yourself."

"I don't want you to be like me," Mr. Biswas tells his son Anand. The meaning of this in Naipaul's novel is that he wants his son to lead a larger, more expansive life, to avoid the trap of domesticity in a provincial setting in which he has himself become ensnared. Although a Brahmin, Seepersad Naipaul was poor and a member of a minority in a country that played no role in the modern world—his life in Trinidad could be viewed as that of a speck on a pin on a dot. The word "marginalized," so popular among academics doing "post-colonial" studies, does not even begin to get at the quality of his life; the metaphor of margin, after all, assumes a page, but it is not clear that the Naipauls were, in their lives in Trinidad, even on the page. At seventeen, V. S. Naipaul had already planned his escape—an escape with no return: "I have nine months left [in Trinidad]. Then I shall go away never to come back." Six months after his father's death, when his mother beseeches him to return home, Naipaul writes: "I think I shall die if I had to spend the rest of my life in Trinidad. The place is too small, the values are all wrong, and the people are petty." His father would have had no difficulty understanding this.

No sooner does Naipaul depart Trinidad than he breathes a different, a deeper and richer air. On the brief layover awaiting the trip to London, he finds New York an astonishment: "Luxury and decadence." London is even better: "I don't see how I

1 *Between Father and Son: Family Letters*, by V. S. Naipaul; Alfred A. Knopf, 297 pages, $26.

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could live anywhere else but in London." He quickly picks up the reigning spirit at Oxford, which is to work hard but not too hard. He rightly gauges the closing down of the English aristocracy, yet enjoys all that is available to the Oxford undergraduate in the way of aristocratic leisure and small pleasures. The world opens up to him; during vacations he goes to France, visits Spain, meets Germans. A competitor in the skirt chase, he complains about the tallness of English girls. "I have got to learn how to dance," writes the boy whose dour adult face would one day cause Saul Bellow to remark that one look at him and he could forego Yom Kippur.

As a young man on whom not much was lost, Naipaul did not remain callow for long. An old Arab proverb has it that, when your son becomes a man, make him your brother. Which is precisely what Seepersad Naipaul did. "I am remembering you today," he writes on the boy's birthday, "as my 19-year old brother." Along with being brothers, they are fellow writers, shooting literary advice back and forth to each other across the waters. The father asks the son to help place some journalism for him in England, adding "keep the money." He is working as a subeditor, doing page make-up, on a Trinidadian newspaper, while his son, beginning to do reporting for *Isis*, an Oxford student magazine, reports: "I find I have a great liking for journalism." Son writes to father: "I have always admired you as a writer. And I am convinced that, were you born in England, you would have been famous and rich and pounced upon by intellectuals." Father writes to son: "I cannot imagine seeing you write a bad story. . . . My God! At your age I could barely manage to write a good letter." More encouraging yet: "I have no doubt you will be a great writer."

Seepersad Naipaul's advice to his son about writing is always sound. "Read Conrad for intensity of expression, but for the most part be yourself." On the formation of style, he tells him:

> Don't care to please any person but yourself. Only see that you have succeeded in saying exactly what you want to say—without showing off; with utter, brave sincerity—and you will have achieved style, because you will have been yourself.

The son's advice to the father is, naturally enough, less profound, more about the market for his work. Apropos of his father writing a novel—which he would not live long enough to get around to doing—his son reminds him that he "should realize that the society of the West Indies is a very interesting one—one of phony sophistication." He reminds his father that Joyce Cary only began writing his novels after retiring from the Colonial Service. "You have enough material for a hundred stories," he implores, typing out his exhortation in capital letters. "For heaven's sake start writing them. You can write and you know it. Stop making excuses." Imagine taking this from one's child. Seepersad Naipaul did, without the least shred, insofar as one can determine, of resentment.

Even as the boy becomes the man the father himself wished to be, the father continues to worry about him, understanding that his temperament, so much that of the artist, cannot but cause him difficulty. "Perception is rare," he writes to his son, "and intelligence is by no means widespread. Those who have it to any unusual degree often suffer terribly." Meanwhile, the son writes: "I discover in myself all types of aristocratic traits." He is an aristocrat in the making, at least in the sense, as Balzac once wrote, that "a true artist is a prince." But the hauteur, which comes all too easily to the son, is not—small wonder—everywhere appreciated. He writes to his father that "a friend told me the other day that people don't like me because they feel that I knew they were fools."

Not all that passes between father and son is about art and soul. Money—money worries, chiefly—come up regularly throughout the correspondence. On the Trinidadian side the old family car needs a

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tire, the fridge breaks down, the typewriter is on the fritz. They attempt to smuggle in cheaper cigarettes to Vido through the mails; they send him clothes. The father encloses money with his letters whenever he can, but feels guilty that it isn't enough. The son, less convincingly, on the plea from his sister in India, claims he is going to send money to help out at home, but can't quite get round to doing so: "I am really just managing to live—very meagerly. And to have friends in this place, one must have money—to buy them drinks and tea." In this realm, the father assumes all the guilt. "Do not worry about sending us money," he writes. "It is bad enough we do not send you anything." Near the end of his life, he tells his son: "Never despise money." Quite right, of course, for being able to do so is a luxury available only to the rich.

Although it is the early 1950s—a time when, for the English, wogs began at Calais—there is not much mention of racial prejudice in Naipaul's letters from England. It is his father, in fact, who first brings up the subject, when he complains that white employees on his newspaper in Trinidad get quicker advancement than he. The son notes that Germans he has met "respect Indians, and they are attracted to them," which suggests that the same cannot be said about the English. Only once, now out of Oxford and thinking about his future, does he note to his mother, apropos of England, that "this country is hot with racial prejudices."

The barriers of English social class loom large. "These differences," Naipaul writes home, "are real, whatever one may say." He complains of a clique at *Isis*. When his father warns him against marrying too soon, he makes plain that he is scarcely in serious contention for doing so, his own social condition rendering him less than a prize catch: "I tell no one I am rich. I am not blessed with a striking appearance, and I am not a man of distinguished associations. A thorough nonentity, in other words."

His parents worry about his marrying a white woman, which he eventually will. This supplies the one occasion when the father comes close to lecturing his son, the one time he becomes a touch social scientific: "If an investigation were made, it would show that by far the majority of inter-marriages end in failure." But the job of pleading is left to his mother, who begs him, "don't marry a white girl please don't." In the end, though, the father consents to his son's marriage; such is his love, he isn't about to lose this boy over anything—compared to the depth of this love—so trivial as race or religion.

At one point, Naipaul informs his parents that he "has been prey to the gravest emotional upset I have ever experienced." He chalks it up to "growing up, I suppose," but he will be plunged into it more than once, and it sounds very much like depression. He will himself later refer to these bouts as "nervous breakdown[s]." A psychologist whom he sees tells him that his breakdown was owing to fear of failure, which he, Naipaul, finds persuasive, though he writes to his mother that he believes it may have been owing to loneliness and the absence of affection. When first told of his son's troubles, his father, a man of the pre-therapeutic generation, tells him that he must stop worrying, adding that "most of the things over which we worry are really no true causes of worry at all." Buddhistically, he advises: "Keep your centre." He sends him a book, *You and Your Nerves*, which he thinks will help him resolve his worries. Touching stuff.

Between Father and Son chronicles the story of an extraordinarily sweet relationship, but the one place that it can be said to have a more strictly literary significance is here, on the subject of what I have called the young V. S. Naipaul's early depression. The reasons for his breakdown seem genuine enough: jerked from one culture to another; living with the pressures of being in a minority, without the support of family and friends nearby; the sense that so much rides on his success—all these things can conduce to knock anyone out of the box of normal mental stability.

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But with writers of dark vision—of whom V. S. Naipaul is clearly one—the question of what an intrinsic depression might contribute to that vision seems almost as unavoidable as it is unanswerable. Psychoanalyzing the dead is unclean work; doing so to the living is even more insulting, and I feel intrusive even treading lightly here. But the question of depression and dark vision first arose for me in reading the letters of Joseph Conrad, in whose mental economy depression seems undeniably to have played a large role. In Conrad's letters—where the gloom is so pervasive, the aura of hopelessness so strong, the sense of quotidian life as a ferocious combat so unrelenting—one has to wonder whether the writer's vision is owing to the depression or the depression to the vision. Complicated, all this, hideously complicated, and useful in reminding us how little we really know about the workings of first-class literary minds.

If the initial reason for the interest in this book is the fame that V. S. Naipaul would later achieve, the book's real hero is Seepersad Naipaul. The young, being intrinsically self-occupied, to put it gently, are almost never persuasively heroic, at least in civilian roles. Naipaul's father's utter selflessness toward his talented son speaks to a noble nature. Not long after his son has his first novel rejected, the father, offering to support him at home for three years, writes: "I want you to have that chance which I never had: someone to support me and mine while I write." He knows his son, knows that "nothing but literary success will make you happy." Later he writes: "Your work is cut out. I stand back of you."

Seepersad Naipaul comes to seem all the more splendid when one learns that, all this while, life is inexorably grinding him down. "In this struggle for existence," he writes to his son, "I feel just hemmed in by hard, inescapable facts and forces." His large family makes its unending demands. His job doesn't give him the time he requires to write the stories that, only after the wish for his son's success, are the true name of his desire. The penultimate nail in the coffin comes when he writes to his son: "This will pain you: but your Ma will be having a baby," their seventh child. The ultimate nail, of course, is the heart attack that comes in his forty-seventh year. Still, he soldiers on. In the last letter to his son printed in this book, he writes of his belief in a "divine Providence," available "only for those who trust."

At at time when V. S. Naipaul is blocked in his writing, his father urges him to begin a new novel and offers himself as a possible subject. "If you are at a loss for a theme, take me for it," he writes, and then provides a sample opening. Nine years later—in 1961—V. S. Naipaul would show that he had taken up his father's suggestion, when he published *A House for Mr. Biswas*, his one book, my guess is, that has a chance of living well beyond its author. Earlier, soon after his son arrives at Oxford in fact, the father suggests, "If you could write me letters about things and people—especially people—at Oxford, I could compile them in a book: LETTERS BETWEEN A FATHER AND SON, or MY OXFORD LETTERS. What think you?" It's not known what his son thought of this suggestion, but now we have that very book. It's almost enough to make one believe in a divine Providence, at least for those who trust.

Fallen angel

Nicholas Shakespeare Bruce Chatwin. Doubleday, 618 pages, $35

reviewed by Jeffrey Meyers

Plato believed a beautiful face reflected a beautiful soul; Shakespeare, in the opening speech of *Richard III*, equated physical deformity with evil. Tolstoy, thinking of his own thick lips and broad nose, wrote in *Childhood* that "nothing has such a decisive influence upon a man's course as his personal appearance." The stunning photo-

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graph of Bruce Chatwin on the jacket of this biography suggests that Tolstoy was right. In our time, at least, physical appearance influences literary reputation.

Bruce Chatwin (1940–89) was a travel writer and novelist, a charmer and monstrous egoist. Boyish, blond, bronzed by the sun, his cold, piercing blue eyes looked (as an Arab woman said of T. E. Lawrence) "like the sky shining through the eye-sockets of an empty skull." Like Lawrence, Chatwin had an elusive quicksilver personality, precocious learning, and a professional passion for archaeology. Both men, drawn to the tents of desert nomads, were physically and spiritually displaced persons who loved the intoxication of travel and made arduous journeys to exotic lands, often on camel or on foot. They disliked possessions but collected ancient artefacts, and liked to live ascetically in spartan surroundings. Chatwin visited Lawrence's house, Clouds Hill, and his tiny London flat looked much the same, with polished wooden floors, a built-in bunk bed, and meager furnishings.

Both men were mythomaniacs with a genius for self-promotion; they had powerful wills and liked to test themselves in acts of physical defiance. Both had troubled sexual identities (Lawrence a repressed homosexual, Chatwin a married one), and were masochistic, guilt-ridden, and death-driven. Chatwin even claimed that, like Lawrence, he'd been raped and enjoyed it. A friend of Chatwin's observed

> When he gave in to his homosexuality, he was disgusted with himself, which explained the rest of his life, which was a flight from reality —going to Edinburgh, going to Patagonia, always to be fleeing. He became like Orestes after the murder of Aegisthus, pursued by furies.

But while Lawrence helped settle the political boundaries of the Middle East after World War I and wrote one of the greatest books about the war, Chatwin lapsed into hedonism and self-indulgence.

The novelist Nicholas Shakespeare has written a first-rate biography of this mesmerizing character. He's intelligent, artful, and inventive, with a keen eye for the incisive comment and illuminating anecdote, and the same wit and panache as Chatwin. Speaking of Chatwin's in-laws, for example, Shakespeare writes that "the legendary Chanler wealth, like the legendary Chanler Falls, had long since dried up." Shakespeare has done a thorough job of research (following Chatwin's tracks through Nepal, Patagonia, Benin, and the Australian desert), and he maintains a crisp narrative pace, deftly sorting out the facts from the myths. He's especially good on Chatwin's years at Sotheby's, the progression of his mysterious disease, and his cultural legacy; and he gives a vivid account of Robert Mapplethorpe's circle in New York, which captivated Chatwin:

> Muscular men jangled about in chains wearing nothing but leather jockstraps, caps and masks; or laid back in slings, waiting to be fist-fucked, their legs up, taking poppers, eyes rolled back, moaning. And everywhere huge pots of Crisco lard.

Most importantly, Shakespeare is selective. He does not simply cover all the events of Chatwin's life, but shows what they mean.

There are, however, a few flaws and a number of errors in this excellent book, which has no maps, bibliography, or analytical index on Chatwin. (The index is a mess; an author should do his own). Shakespeare gives too much information about Chatwin's ancestors (the subject should always be born in the first five pages) and not enough background on important friends. He should have noted that Chatwin's wife, Elizabeth, was related to James Laughlin, who founded New Directions with his steel fortune; that Penelope Betjeman was the daughter of Field Marshal Lord Chetwode; that Peter Levi, the Jesuit priest, later married Cyril Connolly's widow; that Peter Schlesinger was David Hockney's lover; that Diana Petre was J. R. Ackerley's half-

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sister. Shakespeare twice mentions that Chatwin's friend Raulin Guild died early, but doesn't give the cause of his death. Shakespeare also falls into a common trap by relying on family legend. Citing *Harper's Bazaar* as his source, he says that Henry James called Elizabeth's grandmother his "friend" and "the only truly cultured woman in America." But there's no mention of Daisy Terry in the four volumes of James's letters or in the five volumes of Leon Edel's biography.

Chatwin's great-grandfather was a notorious swindler, sentenced to six years in prison; his uncle was murdered by his cook in West Africa. The son of a Birmingham solicitor and wartime naval officer, Chatwin was undistinguished, almost anonymous, at prep school and at Marlborough. Instead of going to university, he got a job at Sotheby's, where he showed no promise of literary talent. He lacked background and training in art, but "had the right manner, a mixture of bluff, a good eye, and an ability to deal with the rich." Speaking of his beloved Inca hanging of blue and yellow parrot feathers, he wrote that the Peruvians had discovered long before Rothko that "blocks of pure colour floating one above the other produced a mood of anxious calm." He became the darling of the chairman, Peter Wilson (who was, apparently, in love with him), had a spectacular career and became a director at the astonishing age of twenty-five.

Chatwin loathed the ignorant but arrogant staff who claimed an expertise they didn't have, hated having to suck up to the acquisitive but philistine rich, and was repelled by the blatant dishonesty of the prestigious firm. I worked at Christie's in London in the following decade. I, too, was appalled by the double-dealing of the outside "advisers" who used confidential information when bidding against bona fide buyers and by the brazen scams of colleagues. Disgusted with himself but drawn into the circle of corruption, Chatwin boasted that when a François II cabinet came up for sale, he "removed the pillars, bought it at the sale, and put the pillars back on afterwards." When Chatwin's "good eye" went blind in a kind of somatic rebellion against his disagreeable duties, he took a long leave of absence in the Sudan—opthalmic capital of the world. When he discovered that he'd been made a titular rather than fully empowered director, he felt betrayed by Wilson. In 1966, after eight years with Sotheby's, he amazed everyone by suddenly resigning.

He then studied archaeology at Edinburgh University, where Stuart Piggott (whose wife had run off with T. E. Lawrence's brother) considered him a brilliant student. Chatwin's arrogance on a Welsh dig annoyed a tough workman, who retaliated by pounding his head on a wheelbarrow and turning a portable toilet upside down—with Chatwin trapped inside. In November of his second year he decided he wasn't cut out to be a dry-as-dust academic, and threw up another promising career. Fascinated by nomads—by their urge to wander rather than sit still, their capacity to survive as empires came crashing down—Chatwin planned an ambitious book about them. After several years of library and field work, the book turned out to be plodding, leaden and quite hopeless. He couldn't even understand his own argument and threw away the manuscript, which was rescued by his mother. Seventeen years later the material miraculously resurfaced in his fourth book, *The Songlines* (1987), which argued that Australian aborigines had "a continuous song disgorged while walking through a landscape whose creation it describes." Though his theory was false, his knowledge second-hand and superficial, *Songlines* hit a primitivistic nerve, became his most popular book, and transformed him from a cult writer into a bestseller.

In 1965, while still at Sotheby's, Chatwin had married a Radcliffe-educated American colleague, Elizabeth Chanler. Descended from John Jacob Astor, she had a rich mother but a personal income of only $8000 a year. Self-effacing, infinitely toler-

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ant, though often wounded by his behavior, this heroic patient Griselda was the perfect companion for the madly selfish author. As he traveled the world and had many homosexual affairs, she looked after the animals on their cold comfort farm and was even reduced to waiting on customers in a garden shop for £45 a week. Never threatened by his male lovers, she was always ready to drop everything and rush to meet him in remote locales. Chatwin crawled back to Elizabeth when he was mortally ill and could no longer take care of himself.

Though sensuously beautiful, Chatwin lacked warmth and liked the idea of sex better than sex itself. His lovers spoke "of his frigidity, his emotional unwillingness, his lack of connection." A woman who'd seduced him said they'd had sex with "great speed and savagery, as if he wanted it to be over quickly. 'It didn't leave any taste at all, and I was surprised. I was lacerated as if by a Bengal tiger.'" Like the Buchanans in *The Great Gatsby*, "careless people . . . who smashed up things and creatures" and left behind a trail of misery, "when Bruce danced on to the next he had the ability to leave [his lovers] feeling empty and bereft in a way I doubt they ever recovered from."

The first indications that he was HIV positive—high fever, night sweats, and bleeding—appeared in 1983, and he put Elizabeth at great risk until his disease was definitely diagnosed in 1986. He thought he'd contracted it in Australia or from Mapplethorpe's lover in New York. He always denied, even to close family and friends, that he had the HIV virus, and claimed that a Chinese rat was the source of his disease. He never wrote about his ghastly experience with AIDS, a disease which, ironically enough, originated with nomadic tribes in Africa. After his death, he was criticized by gay activists for not using his personal example to make the public more sympathetic to the plight of his fellow sufferers. (E. M. Forster had also been criticized for putting private above public life and remaining in the closet.) When suffering from toxic brain syndrome, Chatwin would spend £25,000 on art in a single afternoon and became, like his fictional Utz, a possessor possessed.

Describing Chatwin's sexual aura, Susan Sontag became schoolgirlish and almost orgasmic: "There are few people in this world who have the kind of looks which enchant and enthrall. Your stomach just drops to your knees, your heart skips a beat." But those never seduced by his fatal charm can now see the radical flaws in his mind and character. He was full of mad unrealized projects, a promiscuous seeker of instant knowledge, a creator of crackbrained theories and an intellectual thief. When Paul Theroux urged him to "come clean" in his self-aggrandizing and notoriously unreliable travel books, Chatwin replied: "I don't believe in coming clean!"

For all his wide-ranging journeys, Chatwin was a compass without a needle, more a domestic cuckoo than a restless nomad. An Indian friend said that "travelling with Bruce was like travelling with your 88-year-old maiden aunt. No piece of luggage was ever good enough. The weather was never right. It was too hot, too cold, too damp." In India he travelled like Garbo, with a colossal amount of baggage that included "the typewriter, the card index, the champagne, the muesli, the pills, the hats, the boots, the grey suits, the pyjamas."

Though charming, Chatwin was childishly conceited and never stopped talking about himself. He exploited and sponged on his friends, treating them like servants as he abused their hospitality. He would burst into the bathroom while his hostess was in the tub, drop his trousers "and plop. I've never met anyone who's done that, ever." Even his stool, he felt, was worthy of notice.

Chatwin's editors—Tom Maschler at Cape, Elisabeth Sifton at Viking—helped him pull his books together. His first and best book, *In Patagonia* (1977), was an instant success. When his first novel, *The Viceroy of Ouidah* (1980), failed, Maschler marketed his next book as if the previous

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one had never existed, and *On the Black Hill* (1982) won the Whitbread prize for the best first novel of the year. By 1998, nine years after his death, his books had been translated into twenty-seven languages and sold more than a million paperback copies in Britain. Chatwin's dazzling beauty undoubtedly enhanced his career. His bizarre life is more interesting than his work, and his work most fascinating when it reflects his life.

Flypaper for ghosts

Robert Musil Diaries 1899–1941.
Translated by Philip Payne.
Basic Books, 607 pages, $40

reviewed by Eric Ormsby

Robert Musil was a truculent citizen of a vanished empire. Old Austria may have been defunct after 1918 but in Musil's excoriating imagination it lived on with perhaps even more hectic exuberance than it once had lived. This was not due to nostalgia on his part. To those who questioned him, he spoke of his homeland as of a world that had utterly ceased to exist (post-Habsburg Austria not, apparently, deserving mention—though Musil did argue against the *Anschluss*). One of his admiring interlocutors, the Swiss historian and diplomat Carl J. Burckhardt, who met Musil in Geneva at the beginning of World War Two, quickly realized that he, and other well-wishers like himself, "had no real inkling of the Double Monarchy that Musil carried in his heart." Burckhardt found it "spooky" (*unheimlich*) to hear Musil converse of Austria, in its "astounding depth and breadth," as "of something dead." In another sense, however, "Old Austria" remained alive only as long as Musil's magnum opus, the gigantic novel *The Man without Qualities*, remained unfinished.[1] This, in fact, rather than any practical or technical exigency, seems to me the profounder reason as to why Musil could never manage to bring his great work to completion. To conclude the novel was to screw the coffinlid definitively into place on the world it had summoned up.

To be sure, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was lost merely in actuality. In the imagination, whose frontiers are nothing if not malleable, Musil's shadow empire flourished apace. In an early chapter of *The Man without Qualities*, Musil distinguishes between "the sense of reality" (*Wirklichkeitssinn*) and "the sense of possibility" (*Möglichkeitssinn*). Musil himself seems to have possessed a supremely elastic sense of the possible; this perhaps accounts for the various mutually exclusive endings to the novel that he left among his papers. Conversely, of course, it might be argued that he suffered from a drastically diminished sense of the impossible; even Methusaleh, with ten times his span of years, would have missed the deadline in bringing Musil's novel, as projected, to a close. Before his death in 1942, at the comparatively young age of sixty-two, Musil estimated that he would need another twenty years to conclude his epic. I doubt this. If Musil were alive today, he would still be obsessively adding new chapters, new characters, and further alternative endings to a novel by then too long even to be perused in a single lifetime.

The same strange mélange of vehement emotion coupled with dry scientific curiosity that makes his novel so idiosyncratic predominates as well in Musil's diaries, now translated for the first time into English, albeit in much abridged form. In the original German, the *Tagebücher* take up 1,026 pages and are accompanied by another, even heftier volume of annotations; the new English translation gives us 420 pages, plus notes and commentary, or less than half of what Musil so compulsively jotted down over a forty-three-year period.

At his death Musil's diaries comprised forty notebooks, six of which have since

1 See the February 1996 issue for Roger Kimball's superb discussion, "The qualities of Robert Musil."

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been lost (two others were stolen but had been previously photocopied). Like Kafka, Musil wrote the diaries for his own use; they are genuine working notebooks, in which he recorded drafts of chapters or scenes, plot outlines, stray aphorisms snagged in passing, musings on dreams, autobiographical snippets, frequent notes on bizarre sexual phenomena (there is "a woman who runs an inn in Carinthia and is well known for her intimate relationship with her mastiff"), lists of books read or to be read, descriptions of the natural world, especially sunsets and housefronts, along with numerous serendipitous observations on nearly all imaginable topics. The diaries also served as commonplace books in which Musil excerpted passages from favorite authors. Certain of the authors cited are predictable influences (Schopenhauer, Nietzsche), others less so (Emerson, Maeterlinck). More pertinently, there are many entries that bear on Musil's works in progress, not only *The Man without Qualities*, but the masterful earlier stories and the plays as well. The diaries also contain sketches and outlines of works Musil projected but never wrote, such as his satire on the Prussian Academy of Sciences to be entitled "The Academy of Pretensionville" (or "Conceit City," as the *Diaries* render *Die Akademie von Dünkelshausen*); this is the same Prussian Academy that rejected Musil for membership because he was "too intelligent to be a true creative writer"! We learn as well of an autobiographical work to be called *The Archivist*, drawing on Musil's unhappy experience as a librarian. After only three weeks in the library of the Technical University in Vienna, he confided to his diary that the work there was "unbearable, murderous" (*unerträglich, mörderisch*). This in turn may remind us, so intertwined are Musil's actual experiences and his fictional recreations of them, of the farcical scene in *The Man without Qualities* when the boisterous General Stumm von Bordwehr asks for reference assistance in the State Library and is treated to a crash course in library science. There is a parsimony in Musil's art; as the *Diaries* make plain, nothing went to waste, all could be recycled, sometimes (as we shall see below) over decades.

It is impossible in a brief review to give more than a cursory sense of the riches to be found in these pages. For example, throughout the *Diaries* the reader comes upon striking aphorisms. Musil was justly proud of these and even compiled a separate collection of his own. Sometimes his pronouncements have a lyrical elegance, as when he notes that "in the hour of misfortune we are seized by a whirlwind that has taken years to weave." (In the German, the perfectly positioned alliteration between "whirlwind" and "weave"—*Wirbel* and *gewebt worden*—gives the dictum the force of verse, and the translation echoes this.) His remarks on poetry, about which Musil was unusually acute, often take this laconic form, as when he writes: "What the poem is about is that which can only be expressed in the poem." (So much for literary criticism!) Elsewhere an aphorism appears to be a gloss on an earlier statement. When Musil writes "From everywhere it is just a single step into the metaphysical," he seems to be giving a slight, almost technical twist to the saying by Hugo von Hofmannsthal (one of the few Austrian writers he admired), "Each subject-matter at each point leads to the Infinite."

Alongside *bons mots* more personal passages emerge. In one entry, Musil writes: "Couldn't sleep until around three o'clock at night. Read Grillparzer's autobiography." (Thereby confirming the use to which generations of well-rested Austrians have put their national poet's *Life*.) In other sections Musil analyzes himself, on occasion critically. Early on, for example, he notes that "I am arrogant, dismissive, reticent, refined, happy." The last adjective startles but rings true; despite all his hardships Musil seems to have enjoyed and maintained an enviable robustness. Others noticed this and commented upon it; Elias Canetti for one attributed it to Musil's regimen of exercise which he maintained with military disci-

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pline to the day of his death. Even about his work, and its apparent failure to win him acclaim, Musil can be surprisingly objective; in the year before his death he comments that his work has not drawn a public because "all my creations fail to say anything like: 'Now you simply must listen to this!'" Admittedly, such moments of self-exposure are rare in these *Diaries*. Unlike Baudelaire, Musil was not one to display his *coeur mis à nu*. In a grand maxim of 1910 he can proclaim that "the author should only show himself in the formal ministerial dress of his characters." In his *Diaries*, the cummerbund may be loosened and the ascot unknotted, but Musil remains throughout in "formal dress."

This does not mean, of course, that Musil's *Diaries* are not alive with human interest, including that which pertains most personally to their author. One reminiscence, of seeing his mother naked when he was eighteen or nineteen, still throbs with the emotion he experienced:

> She must have been at that time a little over 40 years of age and she was very white and full and beautifully made. Although to this day it fills me with a certain appreciation, far more vivid is the shame-ridden and, I believe, angry horror that transfixed me then.

(In reading this we are reminded of the significance that incest assumes in the later parts of *The Man without Qualities*.)

An especially touching trait, because it reveals a weakness in this otherwise armor-plated individualist, occurs throughout in connection with Thomas Mann. Musil loathed Mann but, as we read, it quickly becomes clear that his loathing was inspired by Mann's success rather than by any particular misdeed. Over the years, Mann comes to fill the role of Musil's "evil twin," for whatever debacle or catastrophe Musil suffers, Mann is sure to be simultaneously enjoying some surfeit of glory, some yet richer accolade. Even when Mann was compelled to exile himself from Nazi Germany, Musil noted with envious wonder, he landed not merely on his feet but garnered ever greater affluence and acclaim; in the late 1930s, the Musils by contrast eked out a hand-to-mouth existence under often humiliating conditions first in Austria, later in Switzerland. The fact that Mann wished Musil well—worse, that he presumed to compliment him—served only to enrage Musil more. The irony in all this was, of course, that Mann was the only living contemporary writer of Musil's rank as a novelist, and both knew this, even if neither would admit it. Mann could not be loftily dismissed like, say, Hermann Broch, whose writings Musil disdained to mention, let alone read (the list of those whose work Musil despised is dismally long and includes Joyce as well). His ambivalence to Mann occurs early in the *Diaries*; in 1905, he comments of *Buddenbrooks* that it is "very fine and boring; perhaps an al fresco masterpiece, but boring; in parts, to my surprise, it possesses sovereign power." By contrast, Musil flits only sporadically through Mann's diaries of the time, most often in connection with what Mann delicately termed "troublesome requests," presumably for money or letters of reference.

In his rather mischievous recollections of Musil in *The Play of the Eyes*, Elias Canetti reports that whenever he was informed that someone had praised *The Man without Qualities*, Musil's "first question was 'Whom *else* does he praise?'" In the *Diaries*, Musil permits himself occasional outbursts as when late in life he exclaims, "When I think what successes I have had to watch!" Significantly, by this time he does not include Mann in his list of unworthy successes. Around 1940, after his finances had become more desperate than ever, Musil was heartened by the letters in support of himself he received from the Pen Club in London; among them was a letter from Thomas Mann. Musil comments, "I am touched, particularly by Th. M. to whom I have often been unjust. I am also flattered."

As should be evident by now, this translation of Musil's quite difficult German is

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not only precise but reads very smoothly too. In addition, the translation and its accompanying apparatus have been keyed to each other almost perfectly; it is an easy matter to move from text to the indispensable annotations. Philip Payne, the translator, has contributed a valuable preface which includes a careful chronology of Musil's life and works. The translation has been edited by Mark Mirsky who also supplies a rambling but perceptive introduction admirably abrim with enthusiasm for Musil and his work. The succinct endnotes elucidate many aspects of the often tangled text and there is a welcome "list of omissions" which not only identifies what has been left out but summarizes the contents of omitted sections. As if this were not enough, there are several black-and-white plates of Musil and his family, as well as a photograph of a manuscript page from one of the original diary notebooks, showing Musil's almost illegible script (and tacitly illustrating why it took Adolf von Frisé and his collaborators so long to prepare a complete edition of the *Tagebücher*). I should add that the book itself has been distinctively and elegantly designed; it is a pleasure to look at and to read.

Sometimes Mr. Payne succeeds too well in turning Musil's German into contemporary English and strikes a false note. To give but one example, the German word *Dichtung* has no real equivalent in English, but it is certainly not "creative writing," as in the aphorism, "Creative writing is a battle to achieve a higher species of morality." The English term has wholly different associations; it smacks of the writing workshop, a practice Musil would have abominated. The German term properly applies to poetry, but why not "literary creation" or just plain "writing?"

No sooner has Musil delivered himself of a solemn saying than he veers off towards the comical and we are reminded of what a great comic novelist he was; his true predecessor, in my view, was Rabelais who also liked to mingle the essayistic and the farcical, the exquisite and the outrageous. Be that as it may, some of the diary entries are quite funny; for example, under the heading "Boarding-house," Musil describes "a man who always has to whistle when his wife uses the chamber-pot so that the gentleman in the adjoining room doesn't hear it through the connecting door that doesn't shut properly!" Then, as if in compensation, there are intensely lyrical passages, usually of a descriptive nature, which strike the reader as writing Musil undertook purely for its own sake, out of pleasure in language; sometimes these are astute as well as beautiful:

> Windows after sunset. They look as if gold foil has been stuck onto their inner surfaces; in some of them this has rucked up and formed little waves; others look as if they have been covered with brown packing paper.

At other moments, personal recollections mingle with bizarre descriptive passages, as in the following:

> I recollect vividly a second memory attached to smell: that of the chinchilla fur that belonged to my mother. A smell like snow in the air mingled with a little camphor. I believe that there is a sexual element in this memory.

Such an association, at once raw and *raffiné*, could only come from a writer whose sensibility took shape under the double eagle of Old Austria.

In this vein, the *Diaries* contain many entries of an erotic or blatantly sexual nature, some of them related to Musil's interest in the figure of Moosbrugger, the Jack the Ripper figure in *The Man without Qualities*, others testimony to Musil's own intense curiosity about such matters. Musil was fascinated by young girls whom he often observed from afar and described in intimate detail; and there are passages about such nymphets which would have prompted Humbert Humbert to lick his whiskers.

One of the most horrific things Musil

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noted seems to have haunted him for years. The observation, made in November 1913, when Musil was in his early thirties, concerns nothing more momentous than flypaper, but is an instance of his omnivorous curiosity about small, seemingly inconspicuous things. (The date may be significant; 1913 is the year in which Musil set *The Man without Qualities*). In his *Diaries* Musil writes:

> "Tanglefoot" flypaper: one fly has dragged itself to the edge, two legs and the head are free but however far it stretches forward it is caught fast by the back part of the body and the other legs. Another sits upright, both front legs spread out away from the body in a gesture that resembles quite closely the wringing of hands. . . . They are collecting their strength. Then they begin to whir with all their might until exhaustion makes them stop. Pause for breath; renewed effort. Like a small hammer their tongue gropes out. Their head is brown and hairy, as if made from a coconut.

Musil goes on to compare the trapped flies to "crashed aeroplanes" and to "horses that have broken down and died" and to write that the flies exhibited "infinitely tragic gestures like those of humans."

This observation was important enough to Musil that he incorporated it, eleven years later, in his great story of 1924 entitled "Grigia":

> From one of the many long fly-papers trailing from the ceiling a fly had dropped in front of him and was lying on its back, poisoned, in the middle of one of those pools that the light of the paraffin-lamps made in the scarcely perceptible wrinkles in the oilcloth . . . the fly made a few efforts, each weaker than the last, to turn over. . . . When death came, the dying fly folded its six little legs together, to a point, and kept them straight up like that, and then it died in its pale spot of light on the oilcloth as in a graveyard of stillness that could not be measured in inches or decibels, and which was nevertheless there.

The flypaper reappears yet again in the first part of *The Man without Qualities* in a brief passage in which people are characterized as stuck in the quotidian as hopelessly as trapped flies.

Finally, in 1936, Musil included a self-standing piece on the same subject in his inimitable *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author* (the German title, *Nachlass zu Lebzeiten*, really is untranslatable). It is as though Musil has been rehearsing for over twenty years on the best way to convey to us a tiny scene of horror under our own eyes. In this magnificent and yet appalling piece, the personification of the writhing flies has been taken even further; they are compared to mountain climbers, to sleepers, to "women who attempt to wrest their hands free of a man's fist." Then they "no longer hold themselves up with all their might, but sink a little and at that moment appear totally human." It is striking and significant that the flies only appear "totally human" as they sink. And is not the depiction of the death throes of a society, a depiction all of Musil's work pursues, analogous to this silent battlefield, this massacre in miniature? The way in which Musil in all his evolving descriptions of the ghastly flypaper attributes human attributes to the struggling flies suggests that for him this was a parable, even a living image, of the doomed world he labored so mightily to describe.

Tolle, lege

Allan D. Fitzgerald, editor
Augustine Through the Ages:
An Encyclopedia.
William B. Eerdmans, 902 pages, $75

reviewed by Marc M. Arkin

A. D. 383: an ambitious twenty-nine-year-old provincial teacher of rhetoric boarded a ship in Carthage. He was bound for Rome, where powerful friends promised "better

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earnings," "high honors," and, above all, an escape from the unruly students of North Africa. Unfortunately, he had failed to reckon with his formidable mother: "She, indeed, was in dreadful grief at my going and followed me right to the coast, passionately determined that I should either go back home with her or take her to Rome." Instead, he deceived her in order to get away, persuading her to stay overnight in a nearby chapel: "I lied to my mother—and such a mother." As she wept and prayed on land, "the wind blew and filled our sails and the shore dropped from our sight. She went home and I to Rome." Thus, in his own rueful words, we begin to know Aurelius Augustinus, the man who would become St. Augustine.

Of course, the students in Rome proved no better. After an unhappy year, Augustine moved to Milan. There, under the patronage of Symmachus, a senator and Milan's pagan prefect, Augustine was appointed professor of rhetoric. More important, he came under the influence of Symmachus's cousin Ambrose, the Christian bishop of Milan. It was in Milan—now joined by his mother, Monnica—that Augustine heard the fateful words, "Tolle, lege," that finally led to his baptism (387) and to his embrace of the celibate life. Returning to Africa (388) in the hopes of founding a monastic community, he assumed an ever more important role in the North African church, being ordained a priest (391) and eventually bishop of Hippo (395). He passed his last thirty-five years in Hippo, dividing his time between institutional duties and the writings that would define his legacy to the Church.

In the events of Augustine's life, the reader can trace the rapid and dramatic decline of the Roman Empire. From his early years as a schoolboy weeping over the story of Dido and Aeneas in a secure Roman province to his death as the Christian bishop of a North African port under blockade by the Vandals, barbarians from Southern Sweden, we see the end of the Pax Romana that had secured the Mediterranean for five hundred years. He was thirty-three years a man of the classical world and forty-three years a Christian ascetic; an admirer of Cicero and Plotinus, he lived to hear of the sack of Rome. But not only was his outer world in flux, Augustine himself was constantly changing. And, by writing, by acting, by influencing an ever-growing body of people, Augustine himself helped to precipitate changes in the world around him that were no less dramatic than his own inner transformation from pagan to Manichean to neo-Platonist to Christian.

What is more, we can follow this journey in his own language; Augustine of Hippo is the last person of the classical world whom we know firsthand. To the best of my knowledge, there is not another autobiography written in the west for about a thousand years. At the same time, as one scholar has written, Augustine is "the only church father who even today remains an intellectual power"; "he attracts pagans and Christians, philosophers and theologians alike by his writings and makes them come to terms with his intentions and his person."

What accounts for this fascination with Augustine some 1570 years after his death? I would suggest that it is not simply Augustine's intellectual strength or his astonishing output—a corpus of some five million words. Augustine draws the modern reader to him by the force of his personality, by the timelessness and timeliness of his spiritual journey. Even though his answers ultimately may not be not our answers, his questions are most definitely our questions.

Indeed, the personality that lay behind Augustine's spiritual journey resonates through his writings as with no other ancient theologian. Certainly, we have a feeling for the others: Tertullian is cranky; Jerome a bit prickly; Origen a dreamy idealist. But who except Augustine could have written of his own spiritual yearnings, "Oh Lord make me chaste, but not yet"? And who among us does not understand precisely what he meant? This is also the reason, I would venture, that modern writ-

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ers and readers are so disappointed when Augustine proves himself a man of his age and not ours; when, for example, his attitudes toward sexuality or women or a host of other things turn out to be those of a man of late antiquity.

Of course, it is important not to give short shrift to Augustine's intellectual achievement, a body of work that ranges from quotidian letters and sermons to treatises on systematic theology and controversialist tracts. (As one writer noted, it is instructive to note how many of Augustine's titles begin with the word "contra.") Leaving aside the *Confessions*, surely one of the great books of all time, it is difficult to think about political philosophy without the pessimistic realism of the *City of God*. It is difficult to conceive of the modern exegetical tradition without *On Christian Doctrine*, which permitted the use of secular learning in scriptural interpretation, broadening the existing parameters of textual exegesis. In speculative theology, in works ranging from *On the Trinity* to his *Sermons*, Augustine's influence extended through the Middle Ages and the Reformation, to the present era. And, with his writings against theological dissidents—as much, if not more, than in his constructive works—Augustine defined the direction of the Church for the next millennium and a half.

It is this remarkable life that forms the background for *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*. The book is, quite simply, magisterial. It is also, equally evidently, a labor of love. The volume contains almost five hundred entries representing contributions from more than 140 scholars—most of whom are from North America—in fields ranging from classics, philosophy, and political science to theology and patristics. It treats separately each of Augustine's nearly 120 extant works, some of which are not translated into English. Entries also consider the works by category, such as those against the Donatists or the Pelagians. Moreover, there are articles on classical and Christian influences in Augustine's works, and on persons and historical periods influenced by him. Finally, there are thematic entries whose topics range from reason, sin, and evil to the background of the late classical period.

Each entry has an extensive scholarly apparatus, including bibliography and cross-references to other entries. Further enhancing its usefulness, the book begins with a complete list of entries and ends with a full index to aid the reader in locating subjects that are not apparent from entry titles. Moreover, as part of its introductory material, the book contains tables listing all of Augustine's works, including Latin and English titles, English translations, and generally accepted dates for each.

The accompanying publicity suggests that the book is aimed at academic, seminary, and public libraries. And certainly there is much of the academic study about it. Consider for example, the entry "World" in which the reader is guided through the differences in Augustine's writings between "mundum"—the spatial world, the world opposed to Jesus, and what is to be used rather than enjoyed—and "saeculum"—the temporal world or history.

Yet, there is much to recommend the volume to the general reader. Dipping into the book more or less at random, one comes up with such gems as the entry "Manuscripts." Here, the non-specialist learns in passing that Augustine usually dictated his works to a stenographer (notarius) who recorded his words in a shorthand called tironian notes, named after Cicero's secretary, M. Tullius Tiro. The dictation was then written out longhand, corrected, and edited—both an insight into life in the late Roman empire and a curious sidelight on the importance of Cicero. A related entry, "Epistulae," discusses the vagaries of the postal arrangements of the late empire, explaining how Augustine kept in touch with his far-flung acquaintances, concluding drily that "given the uncertainties of the delivery system, it was wise not to put into writing sentiments you would not want strangers to read."

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Or consider the lovely entry "Friendship, Friends," which shows how Augustine transformed Cicero's classical understanding of friendship—"nothing other than agreement on all things divine and human, along with good will and affection"—into an explicitly Christian concept—"a bond between souls that cleave to each other through the love 'poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us.'" Although the *Confessions* amply illustrates the importance of friends in Augustine's life, the entry drives home the point with a poignant passage drawn from the end of the *City of God*, in which Augustine wrote, "What consoles us in this human society, so full of errors and hardships, except unfeigned faith and the mutual love of good and true friends?" So central was friendship to Augustine that he explored the idea of "friendship with God," a relationship established when God grants human beings a share of his eternal wisdom. Indeed, as the author tells us, at one point, Augustine mused that the Holy Spirit might well be the friendship of the Father and Son.

Less theological in orientation, consider "Ostia," where we find out that the ancient seaport was founded, according to tradition, at the place where Aeneas made his landing to become the progenitor of the Latins. From the Augustinian perspective, Ostia is the place where St. Monnica died and was buried after sharing an ecstatic vision with her son (387); in the entry, we learn that in 1945, two boys digging a hole in the courtyard of the church of St. Aurea found a marble slab bearing a portion of an epitaph from Monnica's grave. As the writer suggests, "monuments of great interest are there to be seen."

The entries vary, of course, greatly depending on the contributor. For example, the disappointingly thin "Life, Culture, and Controversies of Augustine" is lumbered by a writing style that is best described as unduly reliant on appositional clauses. Even its effort at a time line showing key events in Augustine's life on the one side and concurrent events in the church and empire on the other is hampered by an idiosyncratic selection on both scores.

By contrast, the elegant and comprehensive entry "Women" covers Augustine's writings on women, his treatment of the women in his life, and modern feminist reactions to Augustine. Here we learn that, in addition to the nameless "companion" of the *Confessions* and the ubiquitous St. Monnica, Augustine had a widowed sister who became head of a house of consecrated women in Hippo and that after her death he assumed pastoral care over the community. We also are given a judicious discussion of the currents in feminist thought, where Augustine has not always received good press. It ranges from the apologetic—stressing the demands of Augustine's own asceticism—to the critical—Augustine's pessimistic views of sexuality and human nature left the Church a legacy of misogyny and sexual repression—and ends with the recent suggestion that Augustine's theology was both culturally constructed and rested on the irony that "the man who is largely responsible for introducing sex into Eden and gender into heaven could never permit the erotic to symbolize the divine."

If this book makes easier the life of a scholar seeking to pin down an esoteric piece of information, it will have done its job well. But if it makes Augustine more readily accessible to the ordinary reader, it will have done a greater service both to that reader and to the vitality of the western canon.

Lightening the load

Christopher Ricks, editor
The Oxford Book of English Verse.
Oxford University Press,
690 pages, $39.95

reviewed by Paul Dean

The Oxford Book of English Verse is exactly one hundred years old. The first editor was a gentleman-amateur, Sir Arthur Quiller-

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Couch, who was appointed Professor of English Literature at Cambridge as a reward for years of service to the Liberal Party. His *Oxford Book* reflected the tastes of his generation (he was born in 1863) and, although frequently reprinted, now looks at best disarmingly bizarre and is in any case outdated. Its replacement in 1972 was, by contract, the work of a professional academic, Dame Helen Gardner, an authority on Donne and T. S. Eliot. In revising and expanding her volume, Christopher Ricks, a scholar of legendary range but also an amateur of poetry in the best sense of the phrase, begins, as she did, with the thirteenth-century lyric "Sumer is icumen in" and ends, as she did, about a quarter of a century before the publication date. In Gardner's case the terminus was Dylan Thomas, in Ricks's it is Seamus Heaney. Some might wish he had ventured further (I am not the only reviewer to feel he ought to have included Tony Harrison), but, after all, there are plenty of anthologies of contemporary poetry—if anybody wants one.

Although Ricks reconstructs and extends Gardner's work rather than demolishing it, the result is very different. He prints sixty fewer items in three hundred fewer pages, but his book feels more roomy in the Medieval and Renaissance sections, and tauter in the Victorian one. Unlike Gardner, he admits popular poetry, translations, and excerpts from plays. Cutting down on the ruminative mode, and sharpening up individual entries by judicious selection, he widens our sense of the scope of several writers and makes room for many new poems, especially by women, the Scots and Irish, and Americans before the 1770s. Sometimes the changes affect the total impression of a poet's work. Gardner's Jonson selection is better, for my taste, than Ricks's, and he makes some surprising omissions; we look in vain for Herbert's "The Collar" or "The Pulley," Vaughan's "Man," Tennyson's "Mariana" or "The Lady of Shalott," Yeats's "Easter 1916" or "The Circus Animals' Desertion," which are replaced by what seem slighter poems by those authors. There is nothing from *The Prelude* in the Wordsworth section, no James Thomson (of *The Seasons*) at all, and far too much Landor. But Ricks's Shelley and Browning, and a host of minor Victorians, are sensibly pruned, while his Wyatt, Pope, Blake, Hardy, Housman, Edward Thomas, and Robert Graves are all much stronger than Gardner's. Contemporary writers fare variously: Charles Tomlinson and Geoffrey Hill are somewhat flattered, Larkin, Hughes, and Heaney not shown at their best.

If such comments are a polite way of saying the reviewer would have done it rather differently, that is not meant as a carping criticism. Indeed, it is inevitable, because any anthology is a reflection of the taste of its compiler. Ricks's sense of the tradition of English poetry is his own, just as mine is mine. It neither can nor should be otherwise. "Tradition," wrote Eliot, "cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour." It is impossible to say at what point the concept of a tradition entered English poetry; if traditions depend upon a set of conventions of thought and expression shared by writers and readers, we have always had them, from Old English onwards. At any rate, the history of poetic revolutions is a history of traditions overthrown only to be re-adopted in other guises. No one could on occasion write in such an Augustan way as Wordsworth, while, early in the twentieth century, Eliot pillaged French symbolist poetry to create that major American invention, English modernism. Ricks allows us to hear poems calling to each other across the centuries, to guard a sense of tradition, while not being enslaved to it. After all, the word means "what you drag along behind you," and we want to lighten the load from time to time.

Forestalling objections from the thought police about his title, Ricks reminds us that the language and its literature are still called "English" not "British." Nonetheless, they have long been a kind of stockpot into which diverse ingredients have been thrown, stirred, and left to marinate. The

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word "English" itself refers not to a nation, but to a tribe. Latin hymnody and the Vulgate Bible, classical and vernacular epic, troubadour lyric, nonconformist preaching, popular ballads, Chinese love songs, Scots dialect—all among other sources have made English poetry what it is. Yet our poetic inheritance is not what consumerism calls "heritage," and our young people are shamefully disinherited by a national curriculum which prescribes poets chosen by politicians and has largely abandoned the study of the Bible and the classical languages. High culture continues, proudly, to drink from those ancient springs. Eliot was not the last poet to assume a Christian frame of reference, and, in the closing pages of Ricks's anthology, Geoffrey Hill refashions Ovid while Heaney adapts Dante. Yet this is seen as "élitist," so, in the name of accessibility, schoolchildren are offered rap or pop or pap. Maybe poetry has always been a minority occupation, but when there was less education, people seemed to know far more of and about it. There could be few better presents for a young relative than this book, and few better donors than an adult who could read it with the recipient.

Literary tradition is inseparable from tradition of other kinds. The Reformation—the biggest assault on tradition which England has known—left its mark on poetry. Barely thirty pages into the *Oxford Book* comes Wyatt, and with him new ways, not just of thinking or of writing, but of being. His versions of the Penitential Psalms (Ricks prints no. 130), if not unambiguously Lutheran, are at least coolly detached from Catholic traditions of sacramental penance, and marked by a chaste and plain diction beside which the proto-baroque conceits of Southwell's "The Burning Babe" look almost vulgar. Southwell's imagery became impossible, except to later fellow-Catholics such as Crashaw, or was diluted into pretty playthings, as in so much (too much) of Herrick. Herbert, as ever, brings off the balancing act; Ricks finds no room for an excerpt from "The Sacrifice," the nearest

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approach to a medieval poem written after the Middle Ages had ended, but prints "Redemption," in which Herbert represents himself as a poor tenant seeking a renegotiation of the lease from his rich landlord, and searching for him in vain amid the rich and pleasant places of this world:

> At length I heard a ragged noise and mirth
> Of theeves and murderers: there I him espied,
> Who straight, *Your suit is granted*, said, and died.

"A ragged noise" is breathtaking, but hardly less so, once we think about it, is "straight": he said it immediately, but also in straits, and stretched out on the Cross. Almost the only poet now writing like this at all is R. S. Thomas; it's a pity that Ricks prints four examples of his earlier work, and steers clear of the later, starkly despairing religious poetry.

Overall, though, Ricks deserves praise for assembling a book which could prompt many lines of thought, and which is the product of eclecticism saved by sureness of taste from becoming willful. Almost every poem, the knowledge of which once marked a cultivated person, is here; and, amid many rarities and rescue operations, how good to hear no trace of that tone of voice—mean-minded, cynically sneering or narcissistic—in which so much contemporary verse is written. This is an anthology for those of us who still wish to think well of life, and of poetry.

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Notebook

Bolívar's platter

by Theodore Dalrymple

There are two principal objections to the kind of modern art whose claim to significance depends upon the philosophical or social theory it allegedly illustrates, embodies, or exemplifies. The first is its aesthetic nullity, and the second is its intellectual vacuity. Providing nothing grateful to the eye, such art fails to evoke serious emotion, thought, or reflection. There is no reason why artists should be philosophers, of course, but there is every reason why they should not pretend to be.

It was therefore with some surprise, and with a strange sense of relief, that on a recent trip to Colombia I found myself reacting strongly—and favorably—to a piece of conceptual art. It surprised me because I am so hostile to the genre in general; and it was a relief because I discovered that I do not yet suffer too severely from what a psychologist acquaintance of mine calls the hardening of the concepts, a condition that afflicts the middle aged and does to thought what cholesterol does to arteries. I learned that I am, despite my age, still open (or at least ajar) to experience and even, sometimes, to persuasion.

The work of art in question was called *La Bandeja de Bolívar* ("Bolívar's Platter") by Juan Manuel Echavarria. It consists of a series of ten photographs of identical size and shape in a horizontal row, which depicts the destruction of an elegant porcelain platter—la Bandeja de Bolívar. This platter was given to Bolívar to commemorate the constitution of the Republic of Colombia in 1826. A magnificent but delicate bouquet of flowers is painted on it, crowned by the words "Republica de Colombia para siempre"—The Republic of Colombia for ever. To the left is a photograph of the platter (actually a replica) while still in its condition of chaste entirety; to the far right it has been reduced to a small, neat pile of white powder, strongly resembling cocaine. In between, the platter is photographed as it has been smashed into ever smaller and finer shards and fragments. And in the background, there is the recorded sound of a hammer smashing porcelain, a sound simultaneously beautiful and sinister, at once lightheartedly tinkling and appallingly violent.

This installation—a word surely calculated to reduce any civilized person to instant and perfectly justified rage—raises a host of interesting questions. For example, how much contextual knowledge is necessary to the appreciation of a work of art? Must a work of art be able to move a person without such knowledge, and, if it is incapable of doing so, is it something other than art, a political tract, for example? Could someone wholly ignorant of nineteenth-century Russian history appreciate Turgenev or Dostoevsky?

I tried to imagine what *La Bandeja de Bolívar* would mean to someone who knew nothing of Colombia—its history or its present situation—and who saw it far re-

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moved from the country in which it was created. Would it have any meaning at all for a New Yorker, for example, or a Londoner or a Parisian, whose knowledge of Colombia would probably be hazy at best?

I think it would. First, the photographic series is beautifully graded and produced, and therefore has a pleasing, almost soothing, visual impact. Second, it tells a story (easily understood even without the soundtrack, but greatly strengthened by it), which is obvious to anyone who reads from left to right. And only an utter savage, who did not know that a porcelain platter is a refined product of human artistry, ingenuity, and endeavor, would fail to be disturbed by the story: for the deliberate smashing of porcelain platters is not so very far removed from book-burning. *La Bandeja de Bolívar* must therefore symbolize the triumph of barbarism over civilization even for someone with no knowledge of Colombia.

But a little knowledge of the history and present predicament of Colombia deepens one's response to it, of course. And Colombia is a country that soon engulfs any visitor in its problems and their history so completely that he is likely to forget his own homeland has problems too, albeit trifling by comparison with Colombia's. How could it be otherwise when the concierge of his hotel comes running after him as he leaves for the day, to warn him of the manifold dangers facing him in the city: how he must not hail a taxi at random in case the driver be a kidnapper, or how he must not show his passport to a uniformed official lest he be a counterfeit official in search of passports to ransom, and so forth. It would take obtuseness on an heroic scale not to notice that Colombia is in crisis, even without the knowledge that four-tenths of its land surface is now in the hands of insurgents (who have been fighting for half a century), and that it is unsafe to travel by land from any Colombian city to another.

Not that this crisis is the first in Colombia's history, of course. Far from it. One author tried to put the current wave of violence in perspective by listing the numbers killed in all the civil commotions, wars, uprisings, revolts, and revolutions of the nineteenth century, adjusted pro rata for Colombia's current population. For dramatic effect, I here adjust the figures of the numbers killed approximately pro rata for the current population of the United States:

Revolt of Urdaneta (1831): 319,100 dead
War of Los Supremos (1839): 474,840 dead
Revolution of 1851: 113,960 dead
Revolt of Melo (1854): 220,270 dead
Revolution of 1860: 610,200 dead
Revolution of 1876: 710,440 dead
Revolution of 1885: 204,750 dead
Revolt against Vargas Santos (1895): 123,150 dead
Thousand Day War (1899): 5,399,540 dead

And that's just the nineteenth century. Unlike the American Civil War, these frequent violent upheavals settled nothing.

When one looks at the intact Bandeja de Bolívar, with its refined daintiness, one almost imagines oneself back in the world of Jane Austen: of quadrilles and truths universally acknowledged. Certainly the republics created after the overthrow of Spanish colonial rule were born in the hope of freedom, prosperity, and cultural advancement. The Bandeja symbolizes an aspiration towards contemporary European levels of civilization and sophistication: but with the first ominous crash of the hammer, the dream, like the Bandeja itself, is shattered.

And in actual historical fact, the Gran Colombia of which Bolívar dreamed, and which the Bandeja celebrates, proved every bit as fragile as the porcelain itself. Gran Colombia was shattered almost immediately after its creation by the personal ambitions of local leaders such as Santander and Paez. The Gran Colombia of the Bandeja split into three republics—Venezuela, Ecuador, and present-day Colombia—leaving Bolívar unutterably bitter and disillusioned. "He who serves the revolution," he said in his despair, "ploughs the sea." The only surviving symbol of Gran Colombia's evanes-

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cent existence is in the flags of the three republics, which still have the same colors. The shattering was deep and permanent, there was no possibility of reconciliation or reconstitution, and Colombians and Venezuelans now have the same mutual regard as, say, the English and the Irish, or the Germans and the Poles.

So the first hammer blow against the Bandeja, though it produces only a relatively few fragments, and leaves the shape of the platter still visible, is decisive. An ideal once destroyed by cynical conduct can never be recaptured, any more than the Bandeja can be restored to its chaste and pristine condition once it has been smashed. And the desecration of the ideal—the destruction of the integrity of the Bandeja—at once removes all inhibition from further destruction. For what is the moral, aesthetic, or practical difference between a porcelain platter in sixty fragments and one in two hundred or ten thousand fragments?

It is possible, then, to read the series of finely graded photographs of the destruction of the Bandeja as a profoundly pessimistic account of Colombia's history—or rather, to put it more accurately, it is impossible not so to read it. Furthermore, when the Bandeja ends up as a pile of cocaine, one cannot but ask oneself whether there has been a kind of evil teleology at work in Colombian (and by extension all of human) history: that the ultimate goal of humanity, through all its terrible vicissitudes, has been the satisfaction of the desire for an easy but worthless, debased and self-defeating pleasure: that all the violent deaths and other suffering in Colombia have been brought about merely so that the slums of the world should be supplied with crack.

All this one understands at once—immediately—on seeing the photographs that make up a series that simultaneously satisfies the eye. It is a brilliant conception, brilliantly carried out. But it is no mere exercise in cleverness, such as one might expect from artists in more fortunate political climes: for one understands at once also that the artist is a patriot, a man whose heart genuinely bleeds for his beloved country, whose emotions run too deep to be satisfied by expression in simple propositional form.

It hardly came as a surprise, therefore, to learn from the owner of the gallery in the northern suburbs of Bogotá (to which I had gone in a taxi hired at random in the street, against all the precepts of hotel concierges and other well-wishers) that the artist, Juan Manuel Echavarria, was the scion of an old and rich family from Cali, which had suffered grievously from the violence that was gripping the country yet again: the artist's grandfather and sister had been kidnapped, and the former killed by his kidnappers. Apprised of these bare biographical facts, it takes but little imagination to conceive of the equally deep pleasures and pains of belonging to the Colombian elite. Talleyrand's attributed remark, that no one who had not experienced life as an aristocrat under the ancien régime could know the true sweetness of life, comes irresistibly to mind. But the sweetness is more than a little tinged in Colombia by the bitterness of the constant threat—one might almost say certainty—of violence. Life in Colombia, as the gallery owner told me, is a lottery, in which the "winning" ticket brings you kidnap and death. In such an environment, artistic expression will have an urgency that it is inclined to lack where conditions are more settled and satisfactory.

La Bandeja de Bolívar is a many-layered work, then. It suggests the personal distress of an artist who loves his country and whose family has suffered in its own flesh and blood from its dissolution. It suggests a pessimistic reading of the country's history from the time of independence onwards. It suggests that terrible destruction may be wrought for the sake of a worthless, indeed harmful, commodity, as deleterious to the producer as it is to the consumer: a fact with which every inhabitant of every modern city must surely be aware. Above all, it suggests the fragility of civilization itself, and why conservation is as essential to the

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continuation of culture as creation and innovation. This was a lesson I learned comparatively early in life, thanks to my father. As I looked at Juan Manuel Echavarria's work, a scene from my childhood returned to me.

During or just after the war, my father bought a stack of nineteenth-century paintings at Sotheby's for a trifling sum of money. For many years they lay undisturbed in the loft of our house. One day, completely out of the blue and for no very obvious reason, my father decided that they were taking up too much space. He decided to burn them on the garden bonfire. I was about ten years old at the time.

His decision was whimsical: for my father was in general a great storer and hoarder (on his death, he bequeathed me the largest collection of paper clips and safety pins I have ever seen). In the very same loft as that in which the paintings were harmlessly stored was an immense collection of tinned fruit, which he had bought during the Korean War under the impression that the conflict was about to develop into World War III. He expected food to be severely rationed at any moment, and laid in a supply that would have lasted for years.

Even supposing the matter of space in the loft had become urgent, most men would have opted for disposal of the canned fruit rather than of the paintings—which, of course, took up far less space in any case. But my father was not to be deflected by such obvious considerations, perhaps because the removal of the fruit would have reminded him that his powers of political prediction, on which he prided himself, were not as great as he liked to suppose. So, with an alacrity worthy of a better cause, he fetched the paintings still in their gilt frames to the garden bonfire. To judge from the present value of the one painting saved from the general conflagration, paintings worth at least $100,000 soon went up in smoke. At the time, though I was of course without any awareness of their eventual monetary value, I asked my father not to burn them. For even at the age of ten, I knew that to burn works of art was a savage act, brutal, nihilistic, unnecessary, and deeply undermining of the worth of all human life and endeavor. It was virtually sacrilegious. I couldn't have put it in words, but I felt the barbaric nature of the deed. If he didn't want the paintings any more, why did he not give them away and thus ensure their survival?

When I heard the recorded tinkling of the hammer applied to the porcelain in that gallery in the north of Bogotá, therefore, I also heard the crackling of the bonfire all those years ago, and smelt again the acrid smoke in my nostrils. My father gave me an early lesson in the respect and duty we owe the artistic endeavors of the past: how, if we do not care for them, we become savages, even in the midst of plenty.

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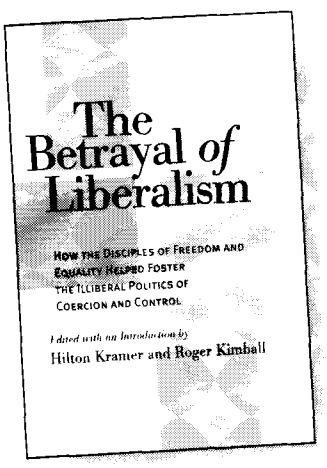
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